PAK-AFGHAN TIES IN THE LIGHT OF PAK-US STRATEGIC DIALOGUE

HUMERA IQBAL

Introduction

Pakistan-Afghanistan relationship has been a victim of conflicting interests. The two have never been at ease with each other and deep suspicions are observed in the bilateral policies pursued by their governments. Pakistan always wished for a friendly government in Afghanistan so that the western border could be considered secure — a wish that never materialised. The relationship got worse during President Hamid Karzai’s first term in office. Pakistan was not only cut off from the region’s mainstream politics but also blamed for the chaos engulfing Afghanistan. Though the situation has changed now and Pakistan is being seen again as the frontline state for resolving the Afghan mess and providing support for Karzai’s government after the foreign forces withdraw. Both countries are looking forward to a healthy beginning where their interests converge for a peaceful and stable region.

Before the recent Pak-US strategic dialogue, Pakistan, a non-NATO ally, was never given due recognition and respect for the enormous contribution and the thousands of lives it sacrificed in the war against terror. In fact, historically Pak-US relationship had always been marked by convergence and divergence of national interests that kept on switching from friendship to friction. The US benefited more during the times of convergence of interests from the geostrategic location of Pakistan

Humera Iqbal is an Assistant Research Officer at the Institute of Regional Studies.
and its traditional security dilemma vis-a-vis India. Whereas Pakistan gained less as it was not given the required support by the US when needed most — during the 1965 War and, again, the 1971 War which led to the disintegration of the country. In fact, the US later imposed severe penalties, embargoes and sanctions on Pakistan. In the post-9/11 scenario bilateral relations saw a shifting policy pattern to dubiousness, and Pakistan still remained target of accusations from all sides. Not only this, the pressure of the ‘Pakistan should do more’ mantra and frequent swings in US mood towards Pakistan, particularly the inconsiderate warnings of Secretary of State Hillary Clinton caused embarrassment and more anger in the country.

With the worsening situation in Afghanistan and setbacks at home for the US administration, Pakistan’s geo-strategic position in the region has once again presented hope for players engaged in Afghanistan. To realize those expectations a strategic dialogue was held which provided a platform to both Pakistan and the US to convey their expectations and demands. However, there are certain concerns on the part of Afghanistan due to the Pakistan-US dialogue and expectations in Pakistan-Afghanistan relations.

Pakistan and the US have subsequently conducted two more rounds of strategic dialogue, one in July and the other in October 2010. However, the paper will focus only on the first round of strategic dialogue held at the ministerial level. The additional rounds are more of an extension to the first one’s objectives and results. At the second round, held at the secretarial level on 19 July, initiatives were taken and new areas of cooperation were explored. Meanwhile, both countries had detailed discussions on all the 13 sectors — decided at the first strategic dialogue (discussed in detail in the paper later) — at the expert technical level which helped in arriving at the implementation stage of the programmes agreed in the first round. During the second round a shift was made from security and terrorism related issues to productive and welfare sectors of Pakistan particularly water, agriculture, health and energy so that the basic needs of Pakistani people could be addressed. A new agreement was reached which would enable increase in production and export of Pakistani mangoes to the US markets.(1)
The US pledged to complete two hydroelectric dam projects to supply electricity for more than 300,000 people in areas near the Afghan border. It also made a commitment for renovation or building of three medical facilities in central and southern Pakistan. The projects are part of a $7.5 billion aid effort that mainly aims at lowering down of growing anti-American sentiment in the country. It is also intended to ease Pakistan’s suspicions so it cooperates in a greater way in the US efforts for turning the Afghan war in its favour. \(^{(2)}\)

In moving ahead towards building a closer partnership, a third round of Pakistan-US strategic dialogue was held from 20-22 October. It mainly focused on the war effort and Pakistan’s role in it, particularly the ongoing counter-terrorism campaigns in the Pak-Afghan borderland. During the meeting Pakistan’s Chief of Army Staff Gen Ashfaq Pervaiz Kayani clearly stated his country’s strategy at the Afghan border and the security problems faced at its eastern border. The US administration clearly conveyed their expectations from Pakistan to do more in the Afghan war and particular stress was put on taking action against the Haqqani network. However, the Pakistani delegation remained firm that the timeline of operation in the tribal areas would be decided by their government. \(^{(3)}\) The Obama administration is already having tough time in their relations with the Karzai government. The Afghan parliamentary elections also witnessed a fraud and irregularity crisis like the last year’s presidential polls resulting in delays and weak governing bodies. On the war front, troop casualties are rising and lack of confidence is visible among allied states even after aggressive operations against militants in Afghanistan. President Karzai’s decision of closing down private security firms working in the country has further complicated the relations. \(^{(4)}\) Therefore, the US administration committed to a $2 billion aid package, later added $300-400 million \(^{(5)}\) more to the multiyear package for military and security aid to Pakistan. This five-year aid package would enable Pakistan to purchase US-made arms, ammunition and accessories from 2010 to 2016. \(^{(6)}\) The US also pledged to seek congressional enactment for creating Reconstruction Opportunity Zones (ROZs) and an Enterprise Fund for betterment of Pakistan’s economy. The next round of strategic
dialogue is to be held in 2011 prior to which sectoral meetings would be held to discuss the progress made on underlined projects. (7)

The third round of the strategic dialogue was timely as it gave a chance to both sides to remove strains from their bilateral ties. There came a shivering wave in the bilateral relations when Pakistani government lodged protests against the unprecedented number of drone missile attacks in the northwest region of the country. These shivers reached a peak when Islamabad blocked a vital supply route for the allied forces in Afghanistan in reaction to an alleged cross-border helicopter raid by NATO troops that killed three Pakistani frontier soldiers. (8) The closure caused loss of hundreds of NATO supply tanks used to carry fuel to Afghanistan as they were torched at the border areas. It left no choice but an explicit apology to Pakistan by American officials including Gen Petraeus and US ambassador to Pakistan Anne W. Patterson. (9)

The US plans to pursue its regional, international and national security interests for which it has been focusing on pushing both Pakistan and Afghanistan to overcome their historical differences. Although while stressing its objectives in the region the US also hopes to take into account the strategic interests of India and other regional neighbours. (10) Pakistan and Afghanistan signed a new Afghan-Pakistan Transit Trade Agreement (APTTA) which allows Afghan trucks to carry export goods to India through the Wagha border and Pakistan to use Afghan territory for its exports to Central Asian countries. This revised pact was signed by the respective commerce and trade ministers in July 2010 in the presence of US Secretary of State Ms Clinton during her visit to Islamabad for the second round of strategic dialogue. This step was taken to bolster both Pakistan and Afghanistan’s economy as it covers a number of trade and transit issues. (11) Another trade agreement between the two countries was also signed in October 2010 and the signing was witnessed by the US Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan, Richard Holbrooke for further strengthening trade relations. (12)

Pakistani army Chief Gen Kayani met Afghan President Karzai along with other officials including ISAF Commander Gen. Petraeus and Afghan National Army Chief
of General Staff Gen. Sher Muhammad Kirmi on the sidelines of the 31st Tripartite Commission meeting of military representatives in Kabul where the two leaders discussed the new counter-terrorism strategy for the region. To improve the regional insecurity situation Islamabad endorsed the Kabul plan of President Karzai which proposed peacemaking with the Taliban. All the top military and diplomatic officials of Afghanistan, Pakistan and US Commander Gen. Petraeus attended the meeting, held in September 2010, to discuss the war situation and the Afghan reconciliatory plan. Pakistan also extended full support to the goals of Kabul Conference held on 20 July 2010. The conference was hosted by Afghan government and co-chaired by the United Nations. The joint working group set up by Turkey, Afghanistan and Pakistan exchanged their views on the outcome of the Kabul Conference by supporting the effort. Although, Pakistan government lately felt it had been sidelined in the ongoing talks between the Afghan government and a section of the Afghan Taliban leadership. This exclusion might affect the future bilateral relations direly, ultimately affecting the peace process.

This paper will explore the relationship between Pakistan and Afghanistan after the strategic dialogue process, what was the strategic dialogue all about and how satisfactory it was for Pakistan. The paper highlights the Afghan response over the talks and their concerns regarding both the US and Pakistan in future. Moreover, options for Pakistan in Afghanistan are also examined.

**Main argument**

The main argument of the paper is that the Pakistan-US strategic dialogue is still in a premature phase. The dialogue was held on the part of the US, for the sole reason of securing Pakistan’s assistance for American agenda of withdrawing honourably from Afghanistan. Pakistan, however, did not receive from the US the support it expected over its national security concerns.

With the resurgence of the Taliban and constant reservations over US war strategy, the situation in Afghanistan has reached a level where there is little hope of
victory anytime soon. The US withdrawal decision conveyed through the strategic
dialogue has clearly exposed the weakening position of President Karzai at home. To
save the Afghan government and the country from collapsing, President Karzai has
realized the importance of Pakistan and the influential role it can play in stabilizing
Afghanistan. In the light of the Pakistan-US strategic dialogue, Pakistan has gained its
lost influential position and is considered vital to future peace in the region and
facilitator for a respectable US exit from Afghanistan. Both Pakistan and Afghanistan
have showed an understanding of the situation and are cooperating with each other.
Pakistan’s interests and policies in Afghanistan are still the same where Pakistan hopes
to have a friendly and stable government where it is not threatened by anti-Pakistan
elements. However, for Pakistan there is serious competition, even challenges from
other regional players already present in Afghanistan, one of them being India with so
much investment in the country. So far, Pakistan and Afghanistan are collaborating in
persuading the insurgents to accept peace through reconciliatory process. For both
countries a regional and accommodating approach is essential for promoting and
realizing potential friendly relationship.

**Pakistan-Afghanistan relations — An overview**

Pakistan and Afghanistan have long historical ties that go back far beyond the
partition of the subcontinent. Yet, despite their cultural, ethnic, linguistic and religious
proximities, the relationship between the two cannot be termed friendly. At times it
reached deteriorating levels because of certain contentious issues — historical legacies
magnified by inner divisions and external influences. After independence, Pakistan
found itself confronted with a neighbour that was the only country that voted against
Pakistan’s admission to the United Nations because of its claims over the Durand Line,
Pakistan’s border with Afghanistan on the western side. The Durand Line has been a
major concern throughout Pakistan’s foreign policy towards Afghanistan since 1947.

The Pashtunistan issue was raised by the followers of the Indian National
Congress — Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan and his brother Dr Khan Saheb — in opposition
to the creation of Pakistan. Afghanistan being a landlocked country dependent on Pakistan for its economic development and transit trade to access international markets, decided on territorial expansion as a way out to the sea. It took up the issue of Pashtunistan, always supported by India, to claim more territory stretching as far as the Arabian Sea. The demand for Pashtunistan also serves as an effective tool the Kabul regimes could employ for diverting the attention of their people from domestic chaos and from the backwardness at home. Due to Afghan propaganda against Durand Line’s validity the border remains insecure and more threatened today with greater challenges for Pakistan. It leads to numerous uncontrollable problems: illegal border crossings on daily basis, illicit drug trafficking, criminal networks’ strongholds, terrorist sanctuaries and fragmentation of society in Pakistan’s tribal areas.

India’s involvement in the internal affairs of Pakistan since its inception to create instability in the country through Afghanistan also remains a core problematic issue in Pakistan-Afghanistan relations. The Kautiliya concept of neighbour’s neighbour being a friend and the neighbour being an enemy, applies here in the case of Pakistan’s neighbours. Both India and Afghanistan partnered together became a major source of apprehension for Pakistan at both eastern and western borders. Except for the Taliban regime, India supported whatever regime came into power in Kabul that opposed Pakistan. In fact Afghanistan has always been an important part of both Pakistan and India’s foreign policy for countering each other.

During the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, the US knowing about the loose nature of tribal areas in Pakistan-Afghanistan borderlands used the region for defeating communism. Pakistan played an influential role alongside the US and Saudi Arabia by becoming a frontline state and providing bases for Afghan resistance forces after the Saur revolution. Pakistan in order to have a friendly government in Afghanistan took this opportunity and tried on many entities beginning with supporting Gulbuddin Hekmatyar. When it became obvious that Hekmatyar would not be able to control Kabul, Pakistan’s support shifted to the Islamist Taliban even though Taliban regime too never recognized the Durand Line as their border. The continuous Pakistani
policy of sheltering and supporting mujahedeen-turned-Taliban backfired in the post-9/11 situation where once again Pakistan, a frontline state for the US, is caught in a security dilemma.

Pakistan-Afghanistan relations tend to be leaning more towards mutual suspicion. Once the Taliban regime, recognized by Pakistan, was ousted by the US, Pakistan became America’s non-NATO ally in fighting them in a war against terrorism. On the other side, both India and Afghanistan joined hands in successfully isolating Pakistan in the region as well as in the international community. President Karzai for all the domestic stagnation and inability in controlling the spread of insurgency started accusing Pakistan of interfering in Afghanistan’s internal affairs resulting in counter-accusations from Pakistan. Kabul accused Islamabad of harbouring Afghan insurgents to destabilize government authority while Islamabad responded with pointing to Kabul’s alleged support in collaboration with India to the Baloch guerrilla movement and attempts at creating instability in the tribal areas.

An incessant blame game also continued between Kabul and Washington and Islamabad and Washington. Karzai was called by the US an inefficient leader and unreliable partner while Islamabad was criticized for “not doing enough” in fighting terrorism. Both India and Karzai took advantage of the situation where Pakistan was under constant US pressure. In pursuit of their converging interests, India blames Pakistan for all the domestic disturbances it is facing while President Karzai, failing to expand his government’s writ over all parts of Afghanistan and being incapable of winning popular support, attempts to divert people’s anger by blaming his domestic disorder on Pakistan.\(^{(21)}\)

The failure in controlling terrorism in Afghanistan had its spill over in Pakistan’s FATA region, particularly in the borderland, and resulted in a disastrous situation in Pakistan. It was thought that the eight long years of war on terror had defeated Taliban and al-Qaeda insurgents in Afghanistan. Yet the resurgence of Taliban with more formidable tactics and manoeuvring skills has become more troubling for both Afghanistan and Pakistan in the region and for the US and allied forces globally.
The fierce comeback of the insurgents has challenged the political and territorial integrity of Pakistan that it cannot tolerate. The lives of the people on both sides of the border are seriously threatened.

In order to control the spillover effects and cross-border militancy Pakistan took the initiative in installing checkposts manned with maximum number of troops and also proposed border fencing and landmining. The proposal was rejected by the Karzai government as Kabul still does not recognize the Pakistan-Afghanistan border line and believed at that time there was no problem in border areas. The US keeps accusing Pakistan of providing safe havens to insurgents. In reality this situation has left Pakistan open to militants’ infiltration and emergence of sanctuaries in border areas which could not be controlled without efforts from the Afghan side. The dilemma of this situation has now compelled both Pakistan and Afghanistan to join hands by reconciling bilaterally as well as regionally since both regional and global interests are involved. Lately there is an understanding on both sides to work together in cooperation rather than continue with confrontation and exchange of accusations.

**Pakistan-US strategic dialogue**

Owing to geographical contiguity the US needs Pakistan’s full cooperation in the military operations against the Taliban insurgents in Afghanistan. Keeping in mind the seriousness of the situation in Afghanistan US warmly welcomed Pakistan’s idea for holding the Pak-US strategic dialogue so that new grounds for cordial bilateral relationship could be prepared by breaking away from the troubled past. The first ever strategic dialogue at the ministerial level held on 24-25 March 2010 in Washington is of utmost importance for the interests of both countries. This was the first round in the series of strategic dialogues where the two countries were represented by both democratic government leaders and top military officials. This included Foreign Minister/Secretary of State, Defence Minister/Secretary of Defence and army chiefs of both countries.
The main purpose behind the dialogue was to understand and address the interests and concerns of each other. The US interest was to find a way with Pakistan’s assistance for a safe and honourable exit from Afghanistan while Pakistan was mainly interested in US assistance in economy, and a civil nuclear deal like the one US concluded with India and restraining Indian military role in Afghanistan. Pakistan has been seeking a civil nuclear deal and considers it imperative for restoring balance in the region.

The strategic dialogue covered all the three aspects — civilian, political and military. The civilian part of the dialogue included bilateral cooperation in the fields of economy and trade, energy, law enforcement, science and technology, education, agriculture, water, health, communications, and public diplomacy. The military part dealt with assistance in defence, security, non-proliferation and counter-terrorism while the political part of the dialogue covered strategic stability and continuation of political dialogues for resolving key national security issues. For handling all the mentioned sectors of cooperation a Policy Steering Group was established to intensify and expand the sector-by-sector dialogue process. (24) Basically the original past three dialogues held in 2006, 07 and 08 under the Bush administration were not at the ministerial level and had only four tracks and it was agreed to expand the process from four to ten. But now there will be a three-tiered structure of engagement at the ministerial level, as also at the level of the policy steering group to meet biannually to follow through and then expand the sectoral track. (25) Both sides restated that the core foundations of this bilateral partnership were shared democratic values, mutual trust and mutual respect. These principles ensure that future bilateral relationship would be formed on new format of engagements different from the traditional setup and where relationship would be turned into a partnership. There appeared to be a welcome change from ‘do more’ to acknowledgement and appreciation of what Pakistan has done.

The dialogue restated an improved assistance and concrete steps for the development and requirements of Pakistan. The US mainly remained silent on the major demands presented by Pakistan, it discussed every issue but conceded little.
Talks were held on boosting economic development and sustaining economic reforms, upgrading important road infrastructure in Pakistan’s Northwest, export of agricultural products, working for greater market access for Pakistan, completion of Pak-Afghan transit trade agreement, plans for new water projects, and access to affordable and reliable sources of energy. An amount of $125 million was granted for a signature energy programme. Implementing agreements under this programme were to be signed for three thermal power station rehabilitation projects. Besides these, education exchange programmes, healthcare programmes, investment in technology, resource planning on multiyear basis, multiyear security assistance package including foreign military financing based on mutual strategic objectives. Security-related issues discussed included Taliban, terrorism, India and Afghanistan, and democratic institutions. In social protection efforts US support for the Benazir Bhutto Income Support Programme was committed. There was also agreement on flight access for Pakistan International Airlines (PIA) to Chicago via Barcelona, people-to-people contacts and related programmes.\(^\text{26}\)

The US agreed to provide an annual $1.5 billion aid package to Pakistan’s civil sector over the next five years. The Pakistan military would receive on fast-track basis some $1 billion in outstanding dues for fighting the war against militants along with assurances of future funding and speedy delivery of new weapons including helicopters, F-16s and frigates.\(^\text{27}\)

**How strategic was the dialogue?**

*Pakistan’s national security demands:* Whatever the US offered in the strategic dialogue was not new but significant was the detailed sector-by-sector discussion between the relevant ministers on each side. The central part of the talks on both sides included crucial political and military demands and expectations from each other. The Pakistan side of national security concerns and demands included, *firstly*, an agreement on civilian nuclear deal like the one US signed with India to help it overcome the energy crisis it is facing. Pakistan wants to have a balanced relationship with the US as
well and not a discriminatory one. However, the US, still unsure, did not commit on the request partly because of their concerns towards past nuclear records of Pakistan and mainly because the US Congress was not ready to accept such a deal with Pakistan. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton speaking on the matter said that complicated issues like civilian nuclear deal with Pakistan would be discussed over time. While for the time being the US committed $125 million to Pakistan for its energy sector needs. It seems that as the US did not say no to Pakistan’s request it did not say yes either and for now Pakistan would have to rely on the stated assistance for energy sector to meet its energy requirements. The US plans to have further negotiations on the matter under the Policy Steering Group.

Secondly, Pakistan clearly made its point that it would not tolerate Indian role and involvement of its forces in training Afghan forces on its western border with Afghanistan. During the dialogue session Pakistan emphasized that it respected Indo-Afghan relations but not at the cost of Pakistan’s security interests. In addition to this, Pakistan wants the removal of Indian consulates closer to Pakistan-Afghanistan border. It believes that India is funding and creating disturbances in the sensitive parts of Pakistan, particularly Balochistan through its consulates near the border. India is also believed to be funding separatist movements in Pakistan, particularly in Balochistan, to create instability in the country. New Delhi had offered to train the Afghan National Army (ANA) — similar to Pakistan’s offer — which was politely declined by US Defence Secretary Robert Gates. Keeping this in view any Indian involvement in training the Afghan forces would surely create conflicting and destabilizing situation both in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Therefore to stop and control negative Indian designs emanating from Afghan soil Pakistan needs US support in dissuading India from meddling in Pakistan.

Thirdly, Pakistan wanted the US to persuade India into resuming the peace dialogue with Pakistan and to get involved in helping resolve the Kashmir issue. To Pakistan’s dismay even during the ending session with the media there was no mention of any future US engagements in getting the Indo-Pakistan composite dialogue resumed
and contentious issues like Kashmir and water between the two resolved. Ms. Clinton only encouraged reviving the peace dialogue as they are “friends with both India and Pakistan” and ‘don’t dictate the foreign policies of the two countries.’ America’s reluctance was evident on the matter of Indian role in Afghanistan and Pakistan-India bilateral ties, even though it agreed the conflictual nature of Indo-Pakistan bilateral ties was destabilizing for the regional.\(^{(30)}\)

**Fourthly**, Pakistan was not given an improved US trade access for its textile exports and the matter was put on hold for later discussions. It is crucial for Pakistan’s economy to restore its declining industrial sector through trade access which is more effective than aid. Pakistan’s request for a free trade agreement did not succeed and was left for the future bilateral sectoral meetings. The Reconstruction Opportunity Zones (ROZ) legislation that would give market access and trade concessions to Pakistan is still pending for years.\(^{(31)}\)

**US national security priorities:** The high-profile engagement was chiefly driven by the unending US fight against insurgents in Afghanistan and American efforts for securing Pakistan’s cooperation to facilitate a safe withdrawal from Afghanistan. The political-strategic concerns exchanged during the confidential meeting between the Chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral Mike Mullen, and Pakistan’s Chief of Army Staff, General Ashfaq Pervaiz Kayani, and the unannounced meeting between top Pakistani officials and Vice President Joseph Biden remain unknown to public. Besides, the earlier meetings at the Pentagon and Centcom headquarters were also not revealed though believed to have centred on the Afghanistan war and the post-exit scenario in the region.\(^{(32)}\)

The matter is of utmost importance for the US and President Obama for a number of reasons. President Obama not only wishes to secure public opinion in his favour for the next presidential elections but also enduring support of the international community in Afghanistan. Lately the US has come under greater domestic pressures due to economic overstretch and rise in war casualties. The US war strategy and NATO alliance operations with troops surge are also failing in Afghanistan. The US also finds
President Karzai’s government uncooperative and Karzai an unreliable partner. Therefore Pakistan’s cooperation in an honourable US exit from Afghanistan, then in ensuring that the region remains stable with no security threats to US and the region is a crucial aim of the dialogue as well as future cooperation. The details of the endgame in Afghanistan seem not finalized because it is not clear whether the US withdrawal would be partial or substantial one. It is to be seen for how long the US forces would stay in Afghanistan and when they leave, even in a partial withdrawal, how stable the post-exit Afghan set-up would be. Importantly, would the alliance forces be able to build a strong, large Afghan army and police to take on the fighting against a strong force of Taliban. Hence the upcoming events would reveal the picture of US-Pakistan relations and how they decide to end the war in Afghanistan.

With benefits from the strategic dialogue there are excessive challenges also attached. To term the first-ever strategic dialogue meetings as satisfactory and in the words of Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi as the “move from a relationship to a partnership,” is still too early and overly exaggerated. Mostly when the results are not yet achieved and the crucial Pakistani national security demands were not met as expected.\(^{(33)}\) Moreover, there might be high risks of strained relations if Pakistan’s expectations from the US are not met accordingly. Ties between the two countries can grow steadily as long as both sides feel they are getting what they want from each other. Such as, the US is concerned about the activities of militants in Pakistan as well. America has been pressing Pakistan to take tough actions against the Lashkar-e-Tayba (LeT), the Pakistan-based militant organization, and the Haqqani network. Both the US and NATO view LeT as a global terrorist group with connections in Europe and America for supporting al-Qaeda and Taliban.\(^{(34)}\) While Pakistan has been engaged in talks with the Haqqani group as they believe it is not involved in attacks inside Pakistan and does not pose any direct threat to the country.\(^{(35)}\)

The issue of Indian involvement in Afghanistan is a threat and an increasingly destabilizing factor for Pakistan’s security. America is reluctant in cooperating on the matter as evident during the dialogue’s question-answer session. This clearly raises
doubts about US commitment and cooperation with Pakistan because this is a very serious national security issue for Pakistan and Pakistan Army. It may not come under top US priority of national interests. The rationale behind this possibility is that the strategic dialogue was a specific-interest event and Pakistan-US relations remain transitional. There is a long way to go before the relationship could be described as deep-rooted or a partnership as there is still a trust-deficit to overcome between the two countries.

Dr Tanvir Ahmad Khan, Director General of the Institute of Strategic Studies, Islamabad, who earlier also served as foreign secretary, speaking at a seminar said that another strategic objective of the US was to turn Pakistan into a reliable ally east of Afghanistan because the centre of gravity of geopolitics would shift from Kabul to Islamabad.\(^{(36)}\) This is evident from the post-dialogue extent of increased US involvement and presence in every sector of Pakistan. That would also make it easier for them to monitor the Chinese and Iranian presence. Here again is the diverging point between the two countries over China and Iran. While speaking in the same seminar, Ambassador (r) Tariq Fatimi said that Pakistan had a genuinely diverse strategic relationship with China while the US viewed China as a potential threat.\(^{(37)}\) Pakistan plans to buy two nuclear reactors from China, a deal that alarms the US.\(^{(38)}\) What’s more, Iran is a strong neighbour and strategic partner of Pakistan in Afghanistan and the region as well, whereas the US policies aim at bringing about a regime change in Iran and Washington has lately put Iran under more sanctions that target the energy sector.\(^{(39)}\) These sanctions would have negative impacts on Pakistan’s energy interests as well. How would this keep a future dialogue process smooth is yet to be seen. Hence, there may emerge diverging opinions on certain interests of national security.

For the US to gain support of the people would not be so easy even with all the assistance in the civilian sectors. The US would have to work hard to improve its image in the eyes and minds of Pakistanis. The last thing the Obama administration wants is to be seen as continuing with the Bush legacy in the region. The administration is confronted with an ordeal in proving to American people and to both Pakistan and
Afghanistan that his policies are not just different but will work also. People in Pakistan have serious doubts towards US actions and relate Americans mainly with supporting military rule in Pakistan and giving billions of dollars in pursuit of their interests through military establishment.\(^{(40)}\) Besides, there is a strong perception in Pakistan that since the US is failing now in Afghanistan and the circumstances are such that they want Pakistan’s help in their pullout from Afghanistan, that’s why Pakistan has been given the status of strategic partner. So the relationship is based on transient interests of the US administration and not on permanent partnership. Moreover, there is huge criticism over the increased use of drone strikes within Pakistan which is causing unaccountable collateral damage resulting in hostility towards US motives in Pakistan.

Therefore the dialogue aimed at overcoming mutual distrust for critical cooperation in future. Despite the fact that Pakistan could not achieve its core objectives, the dialogue certainly set an atmosphere of future openness between the two countries which itself is very significant for future partnership. The strategic dialogue being an ongoing process had another important development: US assurance to Pakistan of long-term commitment towards each other’s converging strategic interests when it said American interests lay east of Afghanistan.

**Afghanistan and Pakistan through each other’s lens**

**Post-dialogue developments and Karzai election**

From the time Karzai got re-elected as president of Afghanistan in 2009, there is a welcome shift in his policies towards Pakistan. Most notably, he has not only acknowledged the role of Pakistan in fighting militancy but has also stopped issuing hostile statements and accusations against Pakistan for each and every nuisance his country faces. After failing to expand his control in any part of the country he decided to reconcile with the Taliban and has been strongly emphasizing and actively encouraging regional cooperation for finding a way out of the present chaos in Afghanistan. The Kabul regime has been looking more towards Pakistan’s assistance than that of the US for ensuring stability in the country. In the wake of the planned US
withdrawal, Karzai understands he would be left alone and needs to secure himself with Pakistan’s assistance. The international political shift, post-Pak-US-strategic dialogue, and the domestic situation demand cooperative and friendly relations with Pakistan. There is a realization within the Afghan regime that they are bound to accommodate Pakistan’s wishes in the future policy set-up. Particularly, in the situation emerging after the Pak-US strategic dialogue where it became apparent the US also needs Pakistan’s backing in Afghanistan. The US has declared Pakistan their indispensable ally for their success in Afghanistan because they understand that without Pakistan’s active support success is not possible.\(^{41}\)

Pakistan’s policies towards Afghanistan are clear and unchanged. Pakistan has always wanted Afghanistan, the brotherly neighbour on the western side, to be a friendly country. Both its democratic government and the military seek to have a friendly and stable Afghanistan given the fact that anything happening there has impacts in Pakistan and vice versa. Pakistan Foreign Minister Qureshi while re-stating the government’s policy towards Afghanistan stated that Pakistan aimed at a peaceful, friendly and stable Afghanistan.\(^{42}\) Pakistani military’s stand on Afghanistan was also made known once again by COAS General Ashfaq Kayani when he said that Pakistan wanted a peaceful, stable and friendly Afghanistan.\(^{43}\) It has always been crucial for Pakistan to have long-term security on its western border since it has a problem-prone eastern border. The second important matter for Pakistan is to see Afghanistan becoming a country with strong and stable state institutions including both the army and the police. Pakistan is concerned over broader Indian role in Afghanistan for its own security reasons and has often emphasized limited role for India in Afghanistan. Most specifically, Pakistan wants the US and Afghan governments to check the Indian aspirations of having a part in the training of the Afghan army and police which is not acceptable to Pakistan as it poses threats to its strategic interests. In fact it has been clearly pointed out that an environment in Afghanistan hostile to Pakistan would not be in favour of anyone as it would strain Pakistan’s cooperation and efforts in fighting the militancy.\(^{44}\)
Taliban resurgence leading to reconciliation process

Pakistan, aspiring to ensure a peaceful, friendly and stable neighbour, has welcomed the prospect of closer regional cooperation to provide assistance for stabilization of Afghanistan. Realistically, the regional cooperation approach is vital for future stability and peace in both the countries, particularly in the post-US exit scenario when Pakistan will be further affected by any Afghanistan crisis. Already the immature, myopic policies of the previous US administration creating and then leaving behind a violent, chaotic Afghanistan have massive impacts on Pakistan.

To overcome the current volcanic mess of insurgency both Pakistan and Afghanistan have a unanimous approach on resolving the issue. The Pak-US strategic dialogue has clearly dispelled the doubts from the minds of Pakistani and Afghan policy makers. Pakistan had for the past few years kept on convincing the US that military strategy alone was not a workable solution for ending extremism in Afghanistan; but the US has its own way of handling the situation. Now both Pakistan and Afghanistan are committed to bringing the insurgents to the negotiating table through political strategy to end the war. President Karzai and Pakistani institutions, in collaboration as well as independently, are making efforts in their own ways for persuading hardcore elements to renounce insurgency.

During the NATO commander’s conference on 26-27 January 2010 in Brussels Gen. Kayani had offered to prepare the Afghan National Army (ANA) where the Taliban fighters opting for peace would be integrated. The proposition was aimed at helping improve relations between the two countries and helping Afghanistan stabilize. The main idea is that by giving training to the armed forces Pak-Afghan interaction level would increase which would in turn build better mutual understanding, leading to convergence of interests.\(^{45}\)

Afghanistan held a grand jirga on 2-4 June 2010 where President Karzai invited Afghan tribal elders and religious leaders to discuss proposals for making peace with the insurgents. Some 1,600 notables attended the grand jirga and agreed to appeal to the warring insurgents to declare a ceasefire.\(^{46}\) There were also 30 delegates representing
Afghan refugees residing in Pakistan and Iran. Prominent participants were Sibghatullah Mujadidi, Farooq Wardak, Muhammad Masoom Stanekzai, Wakil Ahmad Muttawakil, Mullah Abdus Salam, Burhanuddin Rabbani and Yunus Qanooni. Even though critics dismissed the jirga saying it did not fully represent all the Afghan political segments since the Taliban insurgents and opposition stayed away in boycott, it is an achievement for Afghanistan to get approval for future peace from a considerable gathering. President Karzai presented his plan which offered amnesty, money and job incentives for Taliban foot-soldiers while asylum for top figures in fellow Muslim countries and removal of their names from the UN and US blacklists which banned them from foreign travelling as well.

The chief demand of the Taliban before making peace with the government is the withdrawal of foreign forces from Afghanistan. The fighting is at its extreme intensity, with the Taliban gaining more strength against massive foreign forces. The militants attacked the opening session of the jirga with guns and rockets. They are presently in a stronger position which gives them little reason to surrender and accept peace. That’s why Pakistan’s assistance is requested to use whatever influence it is considered having over them to get them to lay down arms and accept peace.

So far Pakistan showed willingness to act as a broker in a deal between the Karzai government and the Taliban. Pakistan took up the task of becoming an intermediary by bridging differences between the Haqqani network and the Karzai government. President Karzai had been trying to talk with the Haqqani group for some time in 2007 and 2009 but to no avail. The group did not participate in the peace jirga as well. The group largely operates in the south-eastern provinces of Khost, Paktia and Paktika. The al-Qaeda linked Haqqani group is regarded as one of the biggest threats by both the Karzai government and the US administration in Afghanistan. Pakistani officials are reluctant to discuss the matter in detail though senior officials had said that preliminary contacts had been established with Sirajuddin Haqqani and other leaders of the group through mediation so that talks could be initiated for a political settlement between the group and the Karzai regime. The officials also said that the
leadership of the Haqqani group appeared willing to talk to the Kabul regime. If the group integrates into the future Afghan establishment then on the one hand it is a very constructive development for Afghanistan in coming out of the insurgency and on the other it gives Pakistan a say in the country’s affairs.

However, American nonparticipation in the process is making it very challenging for Afghanistan. There are different approaches pursued on the matter by the US, its European allies, Afghanistan and Pakistan for dealing with the reconciliatory process. The US is committed to following the strategy of first defeating the insurgents and weakening them by buying the foot soldiers before initiating any peace process despite the fact that it’s not working. Lately, General McChrystal, the author of President Obama’s Afghan war strategy, was replaced by General David Petraeus as the top US commander in Afghanistan. The replacement did not change Obama’s commitment to continuing the war until victory, and the US administration under Gen David Petraeus’s command is resolute on moving ahead with the McChrystal plan of degrading and defeating the Taliban. The Karzai regime along with Pakistan’s mediation has been active in encouraging the peace process because of the expected US withdrawal by mid-2011 or until the situation gets stable in Afghanistan. The US and European allies have disagreements over the parties involved in the peace process. The European allies like Germany want Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, Mullah Omar and the Haqqani network to be included in the peace talks because they are Afghans and it is their right to be involved in the process, while the US does not support the idea of having talks with the insurgent leaders like Mullah Omar and Hekmatyar. Moreover, keeping in view the results of McChrystal’s plan it is expected that the US would be bound to have negotiations and some kind of peace arrangement with the insurgents in the near future that does not exclude the Haqqani network either.

Regional cooperation: Karzai’s suggestion

Since both Pakistan and Afghanistan are engulfed in economic crises they have agreed to broaden bilateral trade further. Afghanistan being a landlocked country is
dependent on Pakistan for trade expansion. There have been bilateral meetings on national security matters, economic needs being one of them. Pakistan had taken part in the reconstruction of Afghanistan earlier also, though progress had been slow. So far, Pakistan has completed the reconstruction of a road from Turkham to Jalalabad in the eastern Nangarhar province of Afghanistan. Lately Pakistan is involved in remodelling the road to turn it into a dual carriage highway. Other than trade sector, Pakistan is also engaged in building a hospital in Kabul, known as the Jinnah Hospital Complex. There is a department at the Kabul University. Allama Iqbal Faculty of Arts, gifted by the people of Pakistan.\(^{(60)}\)

During President Karzai’s visit to Islamabad in March 2010, Pakistan’s role remained prominent at the talks as it proposed to enhance cooperation in transit trade, reconstruction, and technical projects. They agreed to develop the communication network, boost trade to $15 billion a year by 2015 and enhance cooperation in education with exchange programmes and doubling scholarships from 1,000 to 2,000. In agriculture, creation of a Pakistan-Afghanistan food bank is under consideration, while in the energy sector joint strategies for early implementation of trans-Afghan energy projects were agreed, with particular focus on CASA-1000 and Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan gas pipeline.\(^{(61)}\)

A Joint Declaration was signed by the two foreign ministers, Shah Mehmood Qureshi and Dr. Zalmai Rassoul, for developing roads, rail and bus services and air connectivity and upgrading the existing facilities. Priority was given to completing Peshawar-Jalalabad Expressway and feasibility study of Peshawar-Jalalabad rail link. Pakistan and Afghanistan are also planning to establish a Silk Route, CEOs Forum and Pakistan-Afghanistan Reconstruction Consortium for reconstruction and development purposes. Both countries considered setting up economic and industrial zones.\(^{(62)}\)

Summits on trilateral basis with Iran and Turkey have also been welcomed by both the countries. During the meetings the focus was on framing a roadmap for forging strong relations and promoting economic prosperity in Afghanistan and the region. A friendly and peaceful environment is very much needed that’s why regional
cooperation has become a priority for all — Pakistan, Afghanistan and Iran. To end hostility, Turkey acted as a mediator between Pakistan and Afghanistan. Therefore, both Pakistan and Afghanistan are pursuing mature policies. A progressive change is seen and there is a realization of the necessity of defeating insurgency through utilizing their commonalities and sharing resources with each other for creating a stable relationship and a peaceful region.

**Pakistan-US cooperation: Concerns in Afghanistan**

Despite the positive mood set for Pakistan in his country by President Karzai there still are certain deep concerns in Afghanistan because of the Pak-US strategic dialogue and future role of Pakistan in the country. The prominent role accorded to the Pakistan Army in Afghanistan for facilitating US exit is seen apprehensively by Afghans. They have ill-feelings towards Pakistan’s presence in their country. They don’t want to see the revival of past days and Pakistan army’s interference in their political and security affairs. Moreover, Pakistan’s role is seen negatively by Afghans as it did not contribute much to the socio-economic sectors of Afghanistan. It is linked more with Talibanization and the severe damage their rule and present activities have left on Afghans lives.

The dialogue has made evident the deep distrust between the US and President Karzai. Afghans feel abandoned by the US which left Karzai with no choice but to give space for Pakistan’s strategic interests in Afghanistan. Afghanistan is also concerned about the vacuum that would be created following US withdrawal which might lead to more chaos and fragmentation of society. The Afghan Army and Police are not strong enough to take over their country’s security responsibilities which leaves Afghanistan’s future in the hands of foreign and local competitors’ interests. Both the Afghan government and the Afghan Taliban had initially excluded Pakistan’s mediatory role from the reconciliation process, although the decision was reversed shortly later due to the arrest of Mullah Baradar, second in rank to Taliban leader Mullah Omar. President Karzai and senior Afghan military officials accused Pakistan for disrupting the peace
process when the Pakistani authorities with CIA’s assistance captured Mullah Baradar.\(^{(67)}\) Senior Afghan officials criticized Pakistan for halting the process at a crucial time when they were secretly in contact with Mullah Baradar who was willing to participate in the grand jirga. In Afghanistan it is believed that Mullah Baradar had agreed to join the Afghan peace process independently without Pakistan’s direction and was of no use for the ISI so Pakistan arrested him.\(^{(68)}\) Besides, they say there were talks going on between Kai Eide, former UN special representative to Afghanistan, and the Quetta Shura since summer 2009 that had reached a higher level but came to a sudden halt because of his arrest.\(^{(69)}\) Hence, the Afghan government is now under compulsion and cannot actively pursue its reconciliatory policy without Pakistan’s role. Some observers also believe that the Taliban would not always be willing to accept any major role for Pakistan in Afghanistan since they are wary of Pakistan’s policies towards them. Pakistan’s U-turn in aligning with foreigners against them has roused their animosity. Several of their top functionaries were arrested in Pakistan and handed over to the US. Taliban would prefer to take decisions themselves in future.\(^{(70)}\) Even the Afghan people are concerned about neighbouring countries presence in Afghanistan. They want the regional actors to work with the Afghan government without getting involved actively in the country.

Besides, Karzai is also grappling with the problem of balancing Indian and Pakistani interests in Afghanistan. Continuing with the India-Afghanistan nexus that reached an extreme level during his first tenure is neither in the interest of Afghanistan’s stability nor his own regime. In the assessment report of Gen. McChrystal increasing Indian influence in Afghanistan was considered unhelpful as it led to regional hostilities and tensions with Pakistan which is unaffordable. If President Karzai does not balance Indian presence in the country, it will affect Pakistan’s cooperation towards resolving the Afghanistan crisis. Today stakes are high for both the Obama administration and Karzai government for achieving their goals. However, Obama would survive the pressures over Afghanistan but this would not be the case for President Karzai who does not have much support at home and within international
community and is isolated even within his own clan. Hence, the pressure is focussed on him to come up with such strategies that would balance India’s role in the country and ensure that Pakistan does not get offended with the resurrection of conflictual issues like the Durand Line, etc.

**Indian involvement: Pakistan’s concern**

As mentioned earlier, Pakistan’s concern in Afghanistan is the curbing of India’s wider role in the country where it is not restricted to the development and reconstructive effort but rather seeks to exploit such projects as a tool for creating disorder in Pakistan's sensitive areas. India-Pakistan rivalry goes back to the times when the demand for Pakistan emerged. After independence the ‘Pashtunistan’ issue provided India a chance to pressurise Pakistan from both borders. Later Afghanistan became a battleground for Indo-Pakistan proxy war. India welcomed any government in Kabul that opposed Pakistan and the 9/11 incident gave it an opportunity to degrade Pakistan by isolating it in Afghanistan and international community.

In the wake of the Pak-US strategic dialogue process President Karzai took some crucial political decisions for Afghanistan’s future interests. One is the removal of two of his three top security officials. One of them, Amrullah Saleh, the former head of Afghanistan’s intelligence service who also served under Ahmed Shah Massoud for the Northern Alliance, was considered by Karzai as an impediment in the peace process. Pakistan too was seeking his removal because Saleh was believed to be one of the anti-Pakistan elements working with India’s intelligence agency, the Research and Analysis Wing (RAW) in Kabul. The second official removed was interior minister Hanif Atmar, who controlled Afghan Police. Karzai had for some time been thinking of sacking them, especially Atmar, but were repeatedly stopped by the United States. Another significant decision was to avoid discussing at the jirga any Pakistan-Afghanistan conflictual issues, like the Durand Line which was not part of the agenda. Both the decisions pleased Pakistan as it believes reviving old conflictual
issues that are exploited by anti-Pakistan elements with Indian backing would undermine improvement in Pak-Afghan relations.

Still Indian presence cannot be curbed in Afghanistan because of the fact that Afghans have a soft corner for India as being the fifth largest donor in Afghanistan’s reconstruction work it is looked upon as a friendly country. Afghanistan being an independent and sovereign country has its own strategic interests that cannot be ignored or sidelined. That’s why President Karzai is reluctant to put any curbs on India in Afghanistan; instead he tried to balance the relationship with both Pakistan and India when he said India ‘is a good friend’ while Pakistan a ‘conjoined twin’ of Afghanistan.\(^{74}\)

**Regional politics in Afghanistan: Risks for Pakistan’s interests**

Afghanistan with so much untapped resources and prospects of known US intentions alongside the policy of regionalism proposed and encouraged by President Karzai opens up avenues for other regional players as well in the country. In addition to this, Afghanistan holds a very significant geo-strategic position for interested parties. India evidently having the status of the fifth largest socio-economic investor in Afghanistan with a huge presence both in terms of resources and men in almost every sector of the country poses great risks for Pakistan’s interests. Through public and private sectors involvement India has earned goodwill of the Afghans which is really challenging for Pakistan in gaining their goodwill in its favour. Besides, New Delhi with Karzai’s help was able to expand its power in the course of time through opening a number of consulates which are also used for covert activities against Pakistan.\(^{75}\)

However, India is not the only actual and potential competitor facing Pakistan’s interests and influence in Afghanistan.

Seeing an opening in the region Iran has become too eager to come out of the isolation imposed by the US and international community. Iran shares close historical, cultural, linguistic and ethnic links with Afghans. Iranian firms have been actively
contributing to the reconstruction of Afghanistan. Iranian aid totals more than US $280 million so far and trade volume between the two countries is more than $1.3 billion. Iran has reserved $100 million for building a university in Kabul. Iran’s presence and strong influence is very much visible in the Herat province of Afghanistan. Not only this, Iran also hosted Afghan refugees like Pakistan and has almost 900,000 legalized Afghan refugees whereas illegal residents’ number is not known. Iran is keen on building stronger relations with Afghanistan though it does not support the reconciliatory process introduced by President Karzai because Iran never recognized Taliban’s legitimacy.\(^{76}\)

China in need to fulfil its potential demands is seeking new opportunities in Afghanistan. Both China and Afghanistan are looking towards building partnership for meeting their economic requirements. China has a progressive economy which constantly requires natural resources like copper, oil and gas for its growth. Afghanistan with so many reserves offers an opportunity to explore and utilize these resources. In 2008 China’s Jiangxi Copper Company and China Metallurgical Group Corporation made a joint investment of $3.5 billion which earned them full mining rights for developing Afghanistan’s Aynak Copper field. Aynak Copper field is the world’s largest undeveloped field. China is also involved in constructing a $500 million power plant and a railway track from Tajikistan to Pakistan which will bring about 10,000 employments for Afghans and $400 million in royalties annually to Afghan government. China is also engaged in developing communication networks, restoration of irrigation projects, public hospitals and road restoration projects awarded by European Union (EU).\(^{77}\)

President Karzai knowing the potential and means of assistance Russia holds has also welcomed Russian engagements in Afghanistan. Russia has been encouraged for investing in Afghanistan and restoring old ties. Russia wrote off 93 per cent of Afghanistan’s Soviet-era debts to strengthen bilateral relations. There seems to be a revival of frequent diplomatic visits particularly from the Afghan side and Moscow reopened its consulate in Mazar-i-Sharif. Moscow has expressed its readiness to rebuild
war-torn Afghanistan and is reconstructing the 142 facilities built by the Soviet Union in the country. This also included the reconstruction of the strategic 2.7-km-long Salang tunnel built by the Soviet Union in 1964 and destroyed in 1994. Russia is also actively supplying humanitarian aid and assistance. It shipped 18,000 tons of flour and is giving anti-narcotics training to Afghan police, etc. Russia is also eager to resume cooperation in aiding the military and offering military-technical supplies.\(^{(78)}\)

Therefore Pakistan, in contrast to the abovementioned potential regional players’ contribution and eagerness, has been slow in contributing towards the reconstruction effort in Afghanistan. For the past many years Pakistan has been associated with the war and military side of the country that has left the people worn out. Afghans look towards countries which are taking care of their necessities. That is why there is an atmosphere of animosity towards Pakistan and its presence in the country while countries like India, Iran, China and Russia are always welcome due to their assistance. Pakistan in pursuing its interests and influence in the country is confronted with the challenge of conflicting interests of these strong, influential regional players. Also, no matter how dreadful the situation is in Afghanistan, it is a sovereign country where the people are much aware of their necessities and have strong opinion over issues. Convergence of Afghan interests with those of Pakistan depends on the future course of events and how stable the situation remains with Pakistan’s help. For Pakistan there are restraints in Afghanistan while competing with these economic giants in one place that may develop into a conflict of interests.

**Policy options for Pakistan**

As a consequence of Afghanistan’s deteriorating situation spilling over across the border, Pakistan is also preparing policies by looking at options available in the wake of US withdrawal. The situation following the Pakistan-US strategic dialogue and the shift in Afghanistan’s policies presents certain crucial options for Pakistan to play in the future. There are important lessons for Pakistan as well in the strategic dialogue which the policymakers should not ignore. They should not get swayed by the exaggerated
remark of Foreign Minister Qureshi talking of an “180-degree” turning point in Pak-US bilateral relations. The most important message for Pakistan from the current process under discussion is that history might be repeating itself where the US and the coalition forces would withdraw depending on the domestic situation in the US while Pakistan would be left alone to deal with the mess in both Afghanistan and Pakistan.

- The governing institutions in Pakistan while formulating future policies need to understand that there are limitations to US assistance and support for Pakistan. For example, the India factor in Afghanistan is a core national security concern for Pakistan while evidently is it does not have any crucial importance in the US. The US listened to Pakistan’s unease over the unbalanced American attitude in the region yet remained non-committal on the subject. Pakistan must realize that for resolving national security issues the US cannot be relied upon always because Pakistan’s concerns may not be United State’s top-priority concerns. Thus instead of asking US assistance in each and every sector, Pakistan must understand the dire needs of the country and the resources it has. Mobilizing its own resources and skills for findings ways of resolving problems is highly essential for Pakistan’s survival in the international world and building strong presence in the region than pursuing a US-centric approach.

- The US assistance to Pakistan in significant civilian sectors is beneficial yet more alarming. It easily gives opportunities to the US to influence and interfere in Pakistan’s internal affairs. It increases the likelihood of more US drone strikes in Pakistan which will further destabilize the country. Not only this, longer presence of US in Pakistan would be justified on the grounds of assistance to Pakistan. Pakistan needs to be alert and careful of too much American involvement in its affairs because that will not go in its favour. Pakistan remains important for the US because of its nuclear facility that they want to get hold of.

- Another important subject that needs immediate attention of policymakers is the development and protection of the Federally Administered Tribal Areas
(FATA) of Pakistan. Pakistan has been operating against its homegrown militants which is not only destructive in nature but has caused unlimited displacement of people. The best course of action for Pakistan is to secure FATA as quickly as possible before the full momentum of war transfers from Afghanistan into Pakistan. No matter what situation turns out to be in Afghanistan, Pakistani government and armed forces just cannot afford to ignore the changing scenario in its troubled areas and the shifting US policies aimed at securing their own interests in Pakistan. Too much US concentration on Afghan problems might lead to ignoring troubles inside Pakistan. This should not be allowed to happen as Pakistan’s western region is excessively vulnerable to the turbulent Afghan situation and Indian manipulations.

For Pakistan to have a major influential role in Afghanistan it is imperative to bring a shift in the policies traditionally followed towards Afghanistan. Pakistan needs to pay more attention to the reconstruction and development effort in Afghanistan. Since Pakistan’s support is vital for the stability of Afghanistan, focus on the reconstructive projects would give it greater edge. Moreover, if Pakistan provides assistance to Afghanistan it will balance the Indian influence as well. In fact close regional proximity with some rationality will be more favourable for Pakistan in future. Afghanistan with massive unexplored resources has to rely on Pakistan for its economic needs that open up opportunities for both the countries to work jointly where Pakistan can provide expertise in the economic sector. For instance, Afghanistan will be awarding contracts to mine one of the world’s largest iron ore deposits discovered lately with estimates of unexploited minerals going up to at least $3 trillion. Afghanistan’s large deposits of iron, copper, cobalt, gold and other precious minerals are known to the geologists but the US Defence Department lately gave an estimate of about $1 trillion of reserves. Pakistan can provide technical support in the area.
Pakistan’s geo-strategic location is so crucial that maintaining satisfactory ties with Pakistan is in US interest. Pakistan needs to insist that the US sign a free trade agreement (FTA) which would help the economy improve. According to Ambassador Tariq Fatimi if the Obama administration agrees to give market access to Pakistani products it would be far more helpful than any assistance such as that coming in under the Kerry-Lugar law.\(^{(84)}\)

The US agenda of exiting Afghanistan with Pakistan’s support has turned the tide in favour of Pakistan becoming a major player in Afghanistan. However, there are divergent opinions on the key role of Pakistan in future. Some analysts believe that though Pakistan is important in Afghanistan after the US withdraws from there, yet not a key factor in its stability as believed in Pakistan.\(^{(85)}\) There are limitations to Pakistan’s capability in ensuring that Afghanistan stays a friendly country. How crucial its role is in a future Afghanistan depends on how much resources Pakistan allocates for Afghanistan’s reconstruction and development. It is evident how much other powerful countries of the region — India, Iran, Russia and China — are spending on Afghanistan’s development which is far more than what Pakistan has been doing.\(^{(86)}\) Also, the US is holding strategic dialogues with other countries as well like India or Egypt, so Pakistan should not get swayed by this event.\(^{(87)}\) While other observers are of the view that Pakistan is important to US and Afghanistan’s future while India is not. Pakistan’s political and strategic significance and its influence in handling the situation has become clearer to the US, they believe.\(^{(88)}\)

Pakistan is playing an important role as a mediator between the Taliban and the Afghan government. Both President Karzai and the Obama administration are backing Pakistan because of the edge it has in dealing with the Taliban. Once the western troops leave or even reduce their numbers the Karzai government would be in a weaker position. The country would be left with a vacuum that would be open for manipulation by multiple powers. Before this happens
Pakistan’s assistance and support is crucially required in bringing insurgents to peace talks or else the whole mess might pose a challenge to Pakistan’s existence. Pakistan has got an opportunity to come out of the isolation imposed on it by the Bush administration despite Pakistan’s efforts in the war on terror, India and President Karzai with Indian support against Pakistan. Hence, Pakistan must continue with this cooperative relationship so that it can regain influence in Afghanistan.

- In dealing with the historical contentious issues between Pakistan and Afghanistan, particularly the Pashtunistan issue, Pakistan must get the US to the Karzai government for recognizing the Durand Line so that their common border could be secured against insurgents’ negative designs. Additionally, to overcome the negative sentiment among Afghans for Pakistan and its people Pakistan needs to press the Afghan government into revising their education policy and replacing anti-Pakistan texts.

- Pakistan should convince the US and the Afghan government into limiting India’s role in Afghanistan. Pakistan believes that India has to come to an understanding and readjust its policies towards Pakistan in Afghanistan. India can be pressured for curbing non-reconstructive work that it carries on on the Afghan soil along Pakistan’s border. Though it is only possible if both Washington and Kabul agree to it. For now Karzai is interested in Indian assistance and developmental projects for the war-torn country which makes it difficult for him to put pressure on India. As for the US, India is looked upon as a long-term partner. During the Indo-US strategic dialogue Indians were concerned about the importance given to Pakistan in Afghanistan. India is interested in having the same influential position with the US and in Afghanistan as it had during the Bush administration. Therefore, New Delhi being a strong strategic partner of both the US and Afghanistan with so much investment in the country cannot be sidelined for allaying Pakistan’s fear of encirclement by India.\(^{(89)}\) If Pakistan does not contribute to Afghanistan’s
reconstruction and development it will have to accept other powers’ presence and greater role in Afghanistan.

**Conclusion**

The Pakistan-US strategic dialogue clearly defined the future direction of US agenda in Afghanistan and Pakistan. All the three countries, Pakistan, Afghanistan and the US, are set to align their policies in accordance with the possible choices available and achieving results for their interests. There are expectations, concerns and demands among the three allied countries from each other. How far the set goals are met to the satisfaction of all will be seen in the coming days. How much flexibility is shown by the players in compromising their interests by adjusting with shifting political realities will form the basis of long-term relations between the US and Pakistan and Pakistan and Afghanistan. It is clear that the Pakistan-US relations are entering a new phase where it is too early to conclude that a successful partnership is established between the two states. Pakistan and Afghanistan have also reached a point where cooperative relationship is imperative for each other’s stability.

The strategic dialogue offered aid and assistance to Pakistan in civilian and military sectors so that the US national security priority in Afghanistan could be met. And that priority is to seek a respectable way out from the country once they have installed a viable political system like they did in Iraq and given enough training to the Afghan Army and Police forces that the Afghans are ready to take control of their domestic situation on their own. The dialogue process did not offer anything new, yet it set an environment of future cooperation and assistance on both sides which was never there in earlier Pakistan-US relationship; even though Pakistan’s strategic demands were not given much support. Pakistan is given a significant status because of the Afghan refugees sheltered in Pakistan, the logistical support provided for NATO supplies, its geo-strategic location, and its way with the Taliban as needed in capturing them as well as in pursuing a peace process with them. The strategic dialogue giving
Pakistan an edge over India in Afghanistan took place at a time when Pakistan was marginalized in Afghanistan as well as among the international community.

Pakistan-Afghanistan relations are affected by the strategic dialogue due to different national priorities. The dialogue opened up strategic doors for Pakistan back into Afghanistan which were closed after the 9/11 incident. Due to the worsening Afghan situation and rising insecurity both countries understand that ending the insurgency by pressing the insurgents into accepting the peace process is in their national interest. Although within Pakistan the policy of zero tolerance is pursued against militants because of their increasing threats to the country. President Karzai feels alone in his country without international allies backing and is concerned over the influential role that the US has assured Pakistan in Afghanistan. It compelled Karzai to follow the US line by making space for Pakistan in Afghan affairs.

Keeping in mind the US exit strategy both Afghan and Pakistani governments are holding peace negotiations with the Taliban. There are certain policy differences on the matter as the US is reluctant to engage in talks with the Taliban at the moment while both Afghanistan and Pakistan are pursuing this course. Despite the official statements of the US administration of not negotiating with the insurgents because the time is not right and the Taliban are still strong, etc., it seems that they are looking forward to the efforts pursued by Pakistan in Afghanistan for softening the insurgents’ stance into accepting the reconciliation process. The US national security priority in Afghanistan is to find a way for their honourable exit from the country. For the purpose they are expecting a solution-based path from Pakistan, their non-NATO ally and now a strategic partner, to prepare ground through negotiating with the hardcore insurgents. Once the hardcore elements are softened up, the US can enter into the mainstream future arrangement through which it can leave the country while at the same time maintain its influence by securing its interests in the resource-rich Afghanistan and the region. Moreover, besides the Taliban’s setting foreign forces withdrawal as a precondition for talks is not in accord with to Pakistan’s interest. Pakistan wants the support of the US and other members of the international community with their
presence in the region so it could achieve a balanced strategic relationship with the US vis-a-vis India in the region. Also, Pakistan wants the US and Afghanistan to limit unconditional Indian presence and role in Afghanistan. However, this would have more destabilizing effects on Pakistan as it will increase US involvement and control over the country with more and more American drone strikes creating instability rather than peace and progress.

Realizing the gravity of the economic crises in their countries both Pakistan and Afghanistan, have joined hands in promoting economic development to bring stability. Pakistan and Afghanistan’s own national security interests demand that they come out of their dependency on the US and concentrate more on generating and mobilizing their own resources and expertise to stabilize their economic sector. Such economic development would bring them greater benefits else they would remain occupied with insurgency and disorder leading to deep societal divisions and isolation. There are doubts about long-term US commitment with Pakistan as the recent development is seen based on American interests which once achieved through Pakistan would mean the end of US engagement as happened in the past. US assistance and investment in both Pakistan and Afghanistan pose alarming challenges as well. It seems that the Americans want to benefit from Pakistan’s geo-strategic position in the region by making it their centre for monitoring the regional players — China, Russia, and Iran. While still in Afghanistan, the US is building its military bases like the one at Bagram for pursuing its interests in the Central Asian region as well. (91)

Pakistan in dealing with Afghans faces challenges due to years of hostile feelings towards Pakistan and Pakistani army. Therefore, in building cooperative relations with Afghanistan Pakistan needs to contribute to its reconstruction and development by helping it with resources and skills. Such positive work is essential for establishing a softer image and overcoming distrust among Afghans which will also give Pakistan regional support against Indian’s aggressive designs. This is an intelligent way to fight Indian influence in the region. Else Afghanistan being an independent country might not compromise for Pakistan over aid and reconstructive assistance
provided by India which is the utmost requirement of Afghans. Pakistan needs to make maximum use of its position for earning positive gains in the future development of the country yet it cannot ignore the fact that there are limits to US assistance and backing. Also, Pakistan should convince Afghanistan that problems would persist if their common border is not secured, which needs Afghan recognition of the Durand Line. Pakistan must ask the US to mediate and put pressure on Afghanistan over this matter. Finally, how meaningful and lasting the bilateral relationship remains depends on how much Pakistan is ready to compromise in the future and how far interests are secured through diplomatic skills.

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