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## To Build Bridges in Afghanistan, Deploy India-Pakistan Nation-Builders

by Kaustav Dhar Chakrabarti

Irrespective of how the ‘Afghan Endgame’ unravels in the coming months, it is safe to argue that stabilizing the war torn country will take decades, and much international help.

So far, the debate on Afghan nation building has pivoted on the duration of America’s presence. The concept of joint India-Pakistan teams across military training, government and development spectrums, presents a wildcard that carries the potential of correcting systemic flaws and resource deficiencies, and also promises to reduce deep rooted mistrusts between rivals India and Pakistan.

Resource crunch, along with regional competition are the most pressing inhibitors in the current policy. Afghanistan, in fact, presents a classical example of how small wars are often lost by counterinsurgents, rather than won by insurgents by their own deed. Besides inadequately low troop levels, till 2008, Afghanistan received only a tenth of reconstruction aid received by Kosovo. Chairman of US Joint Chief of Staff, Admiral Michael Mullen’s frank statement that ‘in Afghanistan, we do what we can. In Iraq, we do what we must’, aptly illustrates the deficiency. ‘Intensity of efforts’ and ‘vastness of means’, essential bedrocks of successful counterinsurgency, therefore, have been effectively sacrificed.

Besides resource deficiency, harmony in Afghanistan is hindered by a fierce competition between India and Pakistan. Western nations’ eagerness to get out of Afghanistan is matched by an intense desire among India and Pakistan to increase their presence in Kabul. India has cultivated strong relations with the Karzai government, posted advisors in key ministries, undertaken important development projects and become a prominent donor. Pakistan, on the other hand, has also retained its traditional ties with sections of the Afghan Pashtun community that, under the rubric of the Taliban, resists ingress into ‘tribal’ autonomy. Shared ethnicity, common worldviews, and the influx of a million plus refugee community have forged strong bonds between the two nations over the past three decades.

Mutual suspicions have caused much acerbity between the South Asian rivals. India accuses Pakistan of supporting Afghan insurgents, an assessment shared by western officials as well. In addition, Pakistan has intentionally limited trade between India and Afghanistan, thus shunting efforts to revive agriculture in Afghanistan. On the other hand, as viewed by Islamabad, India too carries ‘ulterior’ motives. It accuses India of aiding Baloch separatists and is deeply suspicious of possible links with the Pakistan Taliban. It is also mindful of the specter of a pro-India establishment in Kabul inflaming Pashtun irredentism among Pakistan’s tribal community, a strategy which finds historical precedence. Thus, the strategic rule-of-thumb of treating Afghanistan as a non inclusive zero-sum game has caused a deadlock between India and Pakistan, preventing both from realizing their full potential as problem solvers.

While Pakistan and India accentuate existing polarities, they also present an exciting alternative that could plug resource gaps and turn competition into cooperation. Deploying joint Indo-Pak nation building teams could concurrently yield four positive results- provide additional resources, bridge ethnic and political polarities, foster cooperation between India and Pakistan and device means to enable them to verify each other's role, and ultimately, present a mechanism to ensure Afghanistan's neutrality. Skeptics will instantly reject the idea as utopian. India and Pakistan's collaboration in UN peacekeeping missions in hot spots like Somalia, however, fittingly demonstrates the idea's feasibility.

Afghanistan is politically fractured along a north-south axis. The relatively stable northern Afghanistan is inhabited by Tajik and other non-Pashtun communities that earlier comprised the anti-Taliban body known as Northern Alliance. Southern Afghanistan, on the other hand, serves as the main support base of the insurgency where alienation against the Kabul government is at its highest. Not surprisingly, Afghanistan's institutions – the parliament, bureaucracy, and security forces are skewed in favour of non-Pashtun communities. This has prevented large tracts of Pashtuns from becoming stakeholders in the current reconstruction program, and created widely held perceptions of Tajik and Uzbek encroachment into Pashtun spheres.

While India enjoys some influence among the 'northerners', Pakistan is said to be 'in contact' with the 'southerners'. Joint team of advisors, military trainers, bureaucrats, developments experts, medical crews and NGO's – in short, nation builders – could be used to catalyze reconciliation between the north and south by exploiting levers that both countries enjoy with the two camps. This will help create equity in Afghan state apparatus, besides adding much needed numbers in the reconstruction program. And unlike European partners, India-Pakistan teams could be counted to remain in Afghanistan for a long haul.

Successful reconciliation will inevitably lead to dialogue, whose success will hinge on both sides' willingness to compromise and accommodate conflicting interests. After all, even as the Taliban seek to reconcile with the 'rest-of-Afghanistan', there are reasons to be skeptical about the willingness of 'rest-of-Afghanistan' to make political space for their current belligerents. India-Pakistan nation builders could serve as effective interlocutors.

As this happens, the program, jointly formulated by the two countries, will also provide a solid mechanism for India and Pakistan to verify mutual claims of wrongdoing. Not only will this give policy makers additional information to alter negative assessments informed by past history, it will also foster confidence between agencies of the two governments. Such a change may well cascade into a positive can-do attitude, where both sides will realize the mutual benefits of win-win arrangements.

Perhaps the greatest service of 'India-Pakistan Nation Builders' will be to ensure Afghanistan's neutrality, a treaty whereby Afghanistan's neighbours will pledge not to use Afghan soil against each other. A government that accurately represents all sections of the Afghan human terrain will naturally decline subservience to any one neighbour, be it India or Pakistan. Such an arrangement will discourage Pakistan to revert to the use of militant groups as state tools. More importantly, it will help obviate Islamabad's fears, rooted in its tragic dismemberment in 1971, that India may use Afghanistan as a trump card to destabilize north-western Pakistan. Ultimately, the concept of 'India-Pakistan Nation Builders' could one day help

put to rest the ghost of Henry Mortimer Durand, on whose name the border between Pakistan and Afghanistan has staged the longest American war of the century.

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