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No winner in Afghanistan-Pakistan War

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The opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the organization.

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Pakistan and Afghanistan are currently locked in a war which neither side can win. The analyses of the situation are suggesting that since Pakistan's patience with the Afghan Taliban government has exhausted, Pakistan's end game in this war can be to have two possible outcomes – weaken the Taliban regime to an extent that they comply with Pakistan's demands about the TTP and, if this outcome is not achieved, then strike crushing blows to go to the extent of the regime change.

Continued military conflict can further complicate an already aggravated Pakistan-Afghanistan equation. The two neighbouring countries are already in an unprecedented diplomatic freeze where no bilateral channels of communication are active. The border between the two countries has been closed since October 2025 and no movement of people and trade/transit is taking place for past six months.

Although tensions have often spiked between Pakistan and Afghanistan during past three decades and at times these tensions have caused limited border skirmishes, never before the two states have gone into a direct war. Pakistan has a well-founded concern regarding TTP's cross-border terrorism. Afghanistan is not in a position to respond to Pakistan's military muscle, but the real danger in a prolonged conflict would be the scars that this war can leave for a highly trust-deficient bilateral relationship. The Afghan Taliban already may be using this situation to muster anti-Pakistan sentiments in Afghanistan.

Under these circumstances, the chances of a military strategy aiming at achieving a weakened Afghan Taliban regime or capitulation of the Afghan Taliban has limited chance of yielding desired results.

The real issue that Pakistan needs to focus on in its Afghan policy is to address the constantly narrowing base of its relations in the Afghan society over past several decades. In 1980s, while supporting Afghan Jihad against Soviet occupation and hosting millions of Afghan refugees Pakistan enjoyed immense goodwill in Afghanistan. Three decades later during the presence of the US and NATO forces, perception in Afghanistan and internationally was that Pakistan's support was confined to the Taliban against the will of majority of Afghans. In last four years, even the gap between Pakistan and the Afghan Taliban is also becoming difficult to bridge.

The post-2021 situation in Afghanistan has exacerbated the challenges to lasting peace and stability in Afghanistan and the region. While Doha Peace Agreement enabled the scheduled withdrawal of the US and NATO forces from Afghanistan, it did not deliver on intra-Afghan political settlement as supported by most of the countries including Pakistan. The Afghan Taliban after the takeover have also boxed them in an unenviable situation. They have used the vacuum in Afghanistan to impose a hardline exclusive Taliban regime propelling isolation and non-legitimacy. The Taliban have also reneged on their promises, during Doha process and after the takeover, towards developing a future constitutional framework for a broader representative government and observing human rights such as girls education, women empowerment and media freedoms.

Most problematically, the Afghan Taliban have neither shown willingness to become part of regional and international counter-terrorism frameworks, nor they possess such capacity. All intelligence estimates most notably the reports of the UNSC mechanisms indicate that Afghanistan continues to be a safe haven for global and regional terrorist outfits such as Daesh,

Al-Qaeda, TTP, BLA, ETIM, IMU, Jaish ul Adl and many others. Pakistan indeed has become a direct target of savage terrorist attacks by the TTP and BLA.

It is true that most of Afghanistan's neighbours and regional countries including China, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Russia and Central Asian states are concerned about this situation, but their priority and insistence has been to resolve the issues through dialogue and diplomacy. In the meantime, the US and Israeli attacks on Iran last week have pushed the region into an expanded and prolonged war.

In this situation, the pragmatic approach on Afghan front should be to engage strategic allies for carving a way out of the current untenable military conflict with Afghanistan and moving towards a regional diplomatic process for addressing terrorism and other issues relating to Afghanistan and its interaction with the outside world. National sovereignty, non-interference and people's aspirations should be fundamental pillars of such approach.

In realization of this objective, Pakistan can look forward to relying upon facilitation by key regional partners, particularly China, Turkey and Saudi Arabia.

China is a neighbour of Afghanistan which has significantly enhanced its influence in Kabul in recent years. Being threatened by the presence of ETIM in Afghanistan, China has a genuine interest in working out regional mechanisms focused on counter-terrorism as well as long term peace, progress and connectivity. On 4th March, Chinese Ambassador in Kabul Zhao Xing met with Afghan Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi and emphasized the need for addressing the issues through dialogue and diplomatic channels. These contacts can be used to create a momentum for reactivating Pakistan-Afghanistan-China trilateral process to help restore Pakistan-Afghanistan diplomatic and security channels.

Turkey in recent months has been at the forefront of easing Pakistan-Afghanistan tensions. During the current phase too, Turkey has been active in these efforts and Turkish Foreign Minister has maintained contacts with both his Pakistani and Afghan counterparts. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan after a telephone conversation with Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif earlier this week indicated that Turkiye would like to contribute to ceasefire between Pakistan and Afghanistan.

Saudi Arabia is another regional country with significant religious and political clout with the Afghan Taliban leadership. It is in the common interest of both Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, the two strategic defence allies, that at a critical time when the flames of war on Iran are gripping the entire Middle East, Pakistan-Afghanistan tensions can be handled in an amicable manner. Saudi Arabia in recent months has been engaged in quietly mediating the issues between Pakistan and Afghanistan.

On 4th March, the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs Spokesperson Maria Zakharova called on Kabul and Islamabad to refrain from military confrontation and resolve their differences through dialogue based on mutual respect.

Therefore, effort at this stage should be to constructively use the good offices of the friendly regional countries to find a way for transitioning ongoing Pakistan-Afghanistan hostilities into a regionally sponsored peace initiative. Such peace initiative should aim at bringing Afghan Interim Government into regional counter-terrorism efforts. All six neighbours of Afghanistan, namely Pakistan, China, Iran, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan as well as Saudi Arabia

and Turkey should be part of this regional grouping, which can be expanded in future, if required.

Beyond counter-terrorism, the suggested forum should also help Afghanistan in economic development, regional connectivity and inclusive governance.

It goes without saying that there are no winners in Pakistan-Afghanistan war, except the enemies and detractors of the two neighbours. A regional peace and economic initiative can be a win-win proposition.





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