India-Pakistan Cooperation & Afghanistan beyond 2014
By Atia Kazmi

With new leadership in Afghanistan, India and Pakistan would the region continue to face same old challenges? There is a degree of hope amidst scepticism in forecasting regional stability beyond 2014. The three countries can launch a sustainable process of cooperation to stabilise the region.

The Indian and Pakistani governments have unprecedented political power, while Afghanistan has a resilient government. Modi won elections with a clear majority and would not be restrained in decision-making due to Indian coalition politics. He seems amenable to change, provided his concerns with regard to Pakistan are addressed. Nawaz became the first Pakistani prime minister to attend his Indian counterpart’s oath-taking ceremony, clearly signalling the intent to move forward. Afghan presidential candidate Abdullah survived a suicide attack recently. Good India-Pakistan relations and bilateral cooperation to rebuild Afghanistan and enhance its security would reduce the danger of the country slipping into anarchy.

There are, however, reasons for scepticism. India’s relations with Afghanistan in the past have been a source of concern for Pakistan. Pakistan feels that New Delhi’s military support and intelligence cooperation with Kabul exacerbates its security challenges. Conversely, India suspects that the attacks on its personnel and infrastructure in Afghanistan are not entirely indigenous. There is also a concern that there may be a spectacular terrorist attack in India that may reverse the embryonic reconciliation process with Pakistan. Such an incident would test the Modi sarkar’s election promise that it would not exercise past restraint if the attack were linked to entities that are considered quasi-state sponsored. The former Afghan president was quick to blame the attack on the Indian consulate in Herat on the Lashkar-e-Taiba, suggesting that it could have been backed by Pakistan.

Afghanistan faces a myriad challenges. Its promising national security force, the ANSF, is well-trained and adequately equipped. However, it may be difficult to visualise that the ANSF would fill the vacuum that the ISAF’s withdrawal would create. Even the ISAF found it challenging to stabilise Afghanistan during the last 13 years.

The most critical challenge to stabilise the region would be to ensure that any movement across the Afghan-Pakistan border does not lead to a spike in terrorism in Afghanistan, India or Pakistan. The common goal would then be to continually ensure that the Taliban and other militant outfits are contained in their locations.

Terrorism is a regional concern and the acts of terrorism are not unidirectional. Bilateral Indo-Afghan intelligence cooperation should, at least, be trilateral and include Pakistan. The cooperation should involve intelligence sharing, as encapsulated in the 2009 Sharm el Sheikh statement after a prime ministerial summit between India and Pakistan. Effective intelligence cooperation would reduce the chances of destabilising terrorist incidents.

The prospective intelligence cooperation would remain ephemeral until there is consensus amongst the regional countries and other players regarding strict non-interference in the internal affairs of Afghanistan. This policy of non-interference would also imply that the Afghan territory has no scope for anyone using it to destabilise others. Such interference can be consequential, destabilising for the region and would run against the pre-election goals of the leaders who hold the reins in India and Afghanistan.

Until the three states fully commit to trilateral cooperation in stabilising Afghanistan, the times beyond 2014 would be a new Dickensian, ‘Tale of Three Cities’. These would only be the worst of times; it would be age of foolishness; it would be an epoch of incredulity. Afghanistan, India and Pakistan are the most populous region in the world and regional cooperation is the only panacea for 2015 and beyond. Being the larger states, the onus lies primarily on India and Pakistan.

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