



Guaranteeing Borders in South Asia Call for Five Party Talks

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Threats of imminent conflict between India and Pakistan, following the Mumbai attacks of late November 2007, have more or less dissipated given both the sobering reality of nuclear weapons on either side and of India's failure to temper Pakistan with Operation Parakram in 2002. Against a backdrop of confused doctrines such as Cold Start and armed forces that are simply not materially or organizationally equipped for quick reaction, India is left with the usual options of engaging in rhetoric and diplomacy, both departments where Pakistan can more than match India.

However, Pakistan's capability in this latter respect comes from being the smaller power that has only to react to the bigger power, namely India, without having to come up with any initiatives of its own. It follows, therefore, that the way out can only come from India thinking out-of-the-box and coming up with an initiative that will force the other players in the region out of their zones of comfort and force them to walk the talk. What can this new initiative be? .

I

FIVE PARTY TALKS: EXPLORING THE RATIONALE

A new US administration will take over the reins in mid-January and while President-elect Barack Obama's views on South Asia, particularly, his renewed focus on Kashmir, have caused some unease in New Delhi, the latter is not alone in feeling thus. During his election campaign, Obama declared himself in favour of a more proactive American approach on Pakistan in the war against terror, including cross-border attacks from Afghanistan, if necessary, no doubt discomfiting Islamabad and perhaps, Beijing as well. Indian policymakers and analysts,

meanwhile, should remember that Obama had also declared that India would be a "top priority" for his administration and that the US ought to be working with India on several "crucial issues from preventing terrorism to promoting peace and stability in Asia."

Obama's remarks and moves on Kashmir, therefore, must not be blown out of proportion nor are they necessarily a bad thing. Every Kashmir-related remark by external powers is not necessarily a threat to Indian sovereignty; a challenge certainly, but not a threat and therein lies the opportunity. Given this situation, and despite the fact that parliamentary elections are due in India before mid-year, the change of guard in Washington DC, presents an opportune moment for New Delhi to present to the world's preeminent power, a new plan of action with respect to South Asia.

India should call for five-party talks (FPT) in South Asia, involving Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, China and the US with the idea being to provide the Pakistani establishment, including its army, an international guarantee that its borders and territorial integrity would be respected if it pursued the war on terror against the Taliban and Al Qaeda within its territory, wholeheartedly and with all the resources at its command.

The FPT would guarantee the integrity of two important borders both involving Pakistan – the Indo-Pak border including the Line of Control (LoC), and the Durand Line between Pakistan and Afghanistan. A similar proposal has been put forward by Barnett Rubin and Ahmed Rashid in the Foreign Affairs issue of November/December 2008 but their plan for a "contact group" suffers from the very serious shortcoming of not including India and Pakistan. The FPT is no less ambitious in its agenda

but by limiting itself to the absolute key actors in the region, it has potentially a greater degree of effectiveness and hence, possibility of success.

Terrorism, manifested increasingly in the form of Islamic extremism, is the primary reason why South Asia requires a multilateral initiative in the form of the FPT. Each of the countries to be involved in the FPT have suffered casualties from Pakistani actions or actions originating in Pakistan – India, Afghanistan, the US, and China. India's problems on the Pakistan front are too well-known to need enumeration here, except to say that the problem has evolved over time to spread from Kashmir to the rest of India, in the process taking on an increasingly religious hue as opposed to a question of ethnic identity alone.

Afghanistan's current instability driven by the reemergence of the Taliban is also, of course, rooted in state-sponsorship by Pakistan and additionally in the lack of any effective control exercised by the Pakistani federal government over the border with Afghanistan. This last results in the free passage and protection that the Taliban and Al Qaeda enjoy in Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) even as NATO forces led by the US continue to suffer casualties in Afghanistan.

The twin problems of Pakhtoonistan and Kashmir are in essence problems that are state-centric, in the sense that they exist because states exist – India, Pakistan and Afghanistan – and can conceivably also be solved at the level of the states. The key to the solution lies in acknowledging modern borders in the region.

China is no stranger to Islamic extremism arising out of Pakistan either. While it might be argued that China seeks to draw more linkages between the separatist struggle of the Uyghurs in its Xinjiang province and Al Qaeda than is warranted, there is no denying that certain elements in the Uyghur movement were radicalized by their contact with Pakistan and during the struggle in Afghanistan against the Soviets.

The continuing ethnic and religious disaffection in Xinjiang, mean that Beijing must pay close attention to the growth and spread of religious radicalism elsewhere in the region. Moreover, as Chinese businesses and corporations expand their presence in Pakistan, Chinese citizens too have become victims of killings and kidnappings by Islamic radicals in the country. Thus, China watches with growing unease as its "all-weather friend" appears increasingly unable to deal with domestic instability including Islamic fundamentalism and terrorism.

II

UNSETTLED BORDERS: THE DEEPER PROBLEM

To achieve any degree of success against terrorism in the region, however, the FPT cannot actually be limited to discussing only terrorism. The Six-Party Talks in Northeast Asia on the North Korean nuclear issue could continue to take place and progress only because there was a clear agreement of the central problem and the main culprit as it were, and because the power equations were such that North Korea could be cornered or put on the spot.

Despite being broadly considered as the team opposing the US and its allies, China and Russia also did not let North Korea off the hook and were agreed with everyone else that the latter's nuclear programme was a threat to peace and stability in the region. Using terrorism as the agenda of the FPT runs the very obvious risk of Pakistani blandly denying that it has anything to do with fomenting terrorism in the region. Thus, there is no 'main culprit' to whom might be affixed the responsibility of the 'central problem.' Indeed, the culprits are actually multiple and they include the Taliban and Al Qaeda, both of whom are non-state actors and who cannot be part of the FPT.

Indeed, it is for these very reasons that several of the methods used until now – invading Afghanistan to remove the Taliban government – and solutions proposed – talking to the 'moderate' Taliban – have or will come a cropper. Terrorism and insurgencies succeed and fester because they act in unstructured, flexible ways against the structured apparatuses of the state – governments and armies. And in the case of Pakistan, where neither the institution believes that terrorism is the primary threat to its existence, even less can be expected in the war against terror.

The solutions therefore, need to take this into

account if they are to be long-lasting. Espousing an ideology alone is insufficient for an insurgency to grow and succeed; it must also tap into sources of local resentment and in Pakistan and Afghanistan, at least one of the major sources of support for militancy is the demand for Pakhtoonistan by the Pashtuns. The Taliban and Al Qaeda have fed on Pashtun uncertainties about their identity and homeland in an era of territorial jurisdictions and stronger state structures.

The reference to Pakhtoonistan might for some seem a gross overestimation of the problem or an attempt at misdirection, given the issue of Kashmir. However, in their broad contours, the two problems are similar; the difference is only that the Kashmir issue is the comparatively more prominent one. This relative prominence of the Kashmir issue is, in many ways, an accident of history, when one considers the fact that it was the region now separated by the Durand Line that has been the real global hotspot for millennia. Thus, it seems only natural for the region to return to the centre of world attention.

Suffice it to say the twin problems of Pakhtoonistan and Kashmir are in essence problems that are state-centric, in the sense that they exist because states exist – India, Pakistan and Afghanistan – and can conceivably also be solved at the level of the states. The key to the solution lies in acknowledging that modern borders in the region, whether drawn by the British or born as a result of stalemate in war are far from being historically relevant or accurate.

It must also be acknowledged however, that redrawing borders is fraught with more problems than it will solve and instead the effort can be made to make them less relevant to the region, if not altogether “irrelevant.” The FPT on guaranteeing the integrity of borders involving Afghanistan, Pakistan and India would perform this function. The Talks should provide an easier path towards an acceptance of the status quo at the popular level in India, Pakistan and Kashmir – an acceptance that the leaders in the region surely realize is the only way forward.

III

GETTING EVERYBODY ONBOARD

The FPT cannot get off the ground if India did not agree to Kashmir forming part of the agenda in some way and being open to deciding its future together with Pakistan rather than merely on the

basis of the Instrument of Accession signed by Maharajah Hari Singh. If India really hopes to win the war against terrorism – and terrorism remains the major drag on India’s external policy formulation as well as on external investor confidence in the country – it must realize that it has to make the necessary concessions to win the

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larger battle. This battle is not one simply of getting rid of terrorism or of resolving the Kashmir dispute but of bringing in peace, development and prosperity to South Asia as a whole.

Pakistan is unlikely to join the talks merely on an Indian promise of respecting the LoC. Any Pakistani commitment to reduce troops on its eastern front will need to be reciprocated by India. While it would seem almost counter-intuitive, especially in the wake of the Mumbai attacks, demilitarization in Kashmir is a necessary precondition and it should not require Washington to point out the fact to New Delhi. While essential purely from the point of view of Indo-Pak relations, demilitarization would be an opportunity for India to show the world that it is contributing to the war on terror. India would in fact, contribute to the war by actually keeping its soldiers out of combat.

Placing Kashmir on the agenda of the FPT gives India an additional reason to convince the sceptics in the Kashmir Valley and in the Pakistani establishment that it is sincere about solving the imbroglio but within a framework of borders having to be respected first before they can be made “irrelevant.” For its part, New Delhi needs to accede to demands in the Kashmir Valley and open up its side to greater and more substantial interactions – both people-to-people and economic – unhindered by excessive security restrictions to both give Pakistan confidence and win Kashmiri support.

While multiple Pakistani and Afghan sensitivities need to be balanced in the FPT, the US, China

and India working in concert should be able to persuade Islamabad and Kabul to get on board in an exercise that is ultimately aimed at their benefit as well.

An Obama administration could see this as an opportunity to put into practice his call for both a less unilateralist American engagement in the world and an opportunity to try something new in an area where the American policy against terror has so far had limited results. Perhaps most important, this provides the rationale for the US to abandon the mantra of the “war on terror” that has had the effect of leaving American diplomacy “paralyzed” and of legitimizing the “clash of civilizations” thesis. At the very least, Obama has the opportunity to ward off accusations that he was merely posturing on South Asia during his campaign.

Meanwhile, Beijing should be happy to come on board an institutional arrangement that would prevent random US incursions across the Pakistani border and possibly cause Islamabad to turn to help from Beijing, which it simply could not provide. In fact, the Obama administration’s possibly unsympathetic attitude towards Pakistan could be just the spur for China to use its influence with Pakistan’s military to force the latter to pay more attention to the war on terror.

Naturally, Beijing understands that this would imply a drawdown of Pakistan’s forces from the border with India. Would China push Pakistan thus, when this would actually open up options for India either to increase pressure along the LOC or allow it to shift men and resources to the Line of Actual Control (LAC) with China? Thus, the disputed Sino-Indian boundary too comes into play under the FPT, and China’s actions vis-à-vis Pakistan would also be an indicator of the level of trust in the Sino-Indian relationship.

IV CONCLUSIONS

It is nobody’s case today, that the current NATO/ISAF efforts in Afghanistan are sufficient to deal with the Taliban and Al Qaeda leave alone state-building in that country. Islamic extremism in the region is symptomatic of a much larger regional crisis engendered by “leftovers of history” including inter-state mistrust and disputed borders. It is these that need to be brought to the front and centre of the agenda under the aegis of the FPT.

The FPT could provide the way forward to building a sustainable and workable security architecture in the region or if nothing else, a venue for frequent interactions at the political, military and economic levels that can act as confidence-building measures among the participants.

For New Delhi, pushing for the FPT really is a question of leadership. India must realize that it simply cannot leapfrog problems in its vicinity and onto the world stage; it must establish its political and moral leadership in South Asia before it undertakes grander designs. As things stand now and as they will for a while yet, there is only so much that Beijing and Washington can do to undercut India in the region, and how much they will do for or against India depends entirely on the confidence and creativity India can muster in South Asia.

Even if the FPT failed, it would once and for all smoke out the real powers that be in the Pakistani establishment and might end up doing that country some good anyway. If the Talks were to not take off or to flounder because India has been less than bold in its initiatives, it would also reveal the truth about India. Pakistan has often been accused of surviving solely on the strength of its opposition, indeed antipathy to the existence of India; it would seem large sections of the establishment in India too run on similar fuel. And if the Talks succeed, it would be, as the Chinese are fond of saying, “win-win” all around.



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