

Pakistan, China, India and the Afghan Chessboard

Afghan Nationalism Faces Existential Challenge. Part II

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Apocalyptic scenario is unwarranted

*The Pakistani foreign minister **Shah Mahmood Qureshi** [said](#) on May 13, “We will not allow boots on the ground or military bases on our territory.” He was referring to the future US security operations in the region. The Pentagon’s stated position is also not about establishing any new bases in the region but merely that “we (Pentagon) are working all the different options that we have in concert with our State Department intelligence community colleagues to establish the types of arrangements that give us the access basic and over flight necessary to — address the terrorism threats.”*

Within these parameters, Qureshi’s recent visit to the US assumed significance. Qureshi undertook the visit ostensibly to take part in the UN discussions on Palestine, but it coincided with an extraordinary hearing at the US House of Representatives Committee on Foreign Affairs in Washington on May 18 — titled [The U.S.-Afghanistan Relationship Following the Military Withdrawal](#).

The hearing took place at the initiative of **Zalmay Khalilzad**, US Special Representative on Afghanistan Reconciliation. And this also happened to be Khalilzad’s first-ever congressional hearing in his capacity as special representative!

Listening closely to the three and a half hour long congressional hearing is an absolute must for anyone seriously interested in tracking the diplomatic peregrinations over the Afghan question. The salience lies in the renewed acceptance today by the US political elite that Pakistan’s role will remain crucial for a peaceful mainstreaming of the Taliban and for ensuring peace and stability in Afghanistan as well as for preventing terrorist threats.

Khalilzad did not share the apocalyptic predictions of an imminent Afghan civil war and chaos. Khalilzad insisted that the “story of abandonment of Afghanistan” is unwarranted and what is happening is only that the “form of engagement will shift” post-September. In his words, “The combat forces will not be part of future engagement but substantial amount of assistance will be provided.”

What takes the breath away is Khalilzad's estimation that it is possible to "incentivise" the Taliban as well as to "confront them with costs" if they do not keep their word. Khalilzad was not explicit but clearly, the massive US aid to Afghanistan gives it much leverage and creates "soft power" — not only over the Taliban but across the political spectrum and governmental and non-governmental institutions.

Crucially, Khalilzad disclosed that the Taliban admitted to him that they didn't "rule well" as they rode to power "unexpectedly" in 1996, and have since "learned lessons" from past mistakes. He added that the Taliban are conscious of the heavy "costs" they incurred on account of the 9/11 attacks, especially, Guantanamo Bay detention camp, UN blacklisting, sanctions, and the nineteen years of war.

The three things that emerged out of the House hearings are: first, Khalilzad sounded reasonably confident of navigating the post-September phase; two, he got lawmakers on board the Biden administration's policy trajectory to remain engaged in Afghanistan without undertaking combat operations; and, three, he sensitised the lawmakers about the imperative need to work closely with Pakistan.

Pakistan's image on the Hill had taken a heavy beating in the recent years. Therefore, the general acceptance in the Beltway today on the importance of partnership with Pakistan will be the key to the door opening into the pathway for peace in Afghanistan. This has profound implications for regional security.

Qureshi has lost no time to build on the favourable outcome of Khalilzad's initiative to arrange a special congressional hearing that creates a level playing field for future cooperation with Pakistan. Qureshi has a challenging mission, nonetheless — to realise Pakistan's desire for "a broad-based and comprehensive" partnership with the US which should go beyond cooperation on Afghanistan, as he conveyed to US Secretary of State Antony Blinken in a [recent phone call](#) just before embarking on the visit to the US.

Kabul will probably see these trends with a sense of *deja vu*. Some bitterness will remain that the more things change, the more they stay the same. There is continuing scepticism about the US intentions. Having said that, any pooling of the US-Pakistan efforts may ultimately prove overpowering in the present regional environment where there is general acceptance of the mainstreaming of the Taliban as part of a broad-based power sharing arrangement.

The current proposal to create in Kabul a so-called [Supreme State Council](#) (a format that will work for building a consensus around peace and on other peace-related affairs at higher level), which Khalilzad supported, hopes to bring the warlords and other stakeholders on board and to create the platform to settle differences without recourse to force. Of course, the proof of the pudding is in the eating and it remains to be seen whether the proposed council would have decision-making authority.

Equally, a compromise on the Durand Line question will help matters a great deal. However, when asked about it in an interview with Spiegel, former president Hamid Karzai responded cautiously:

"If we could have a relationship with Pakistan similar to the model of the European Union, perhaps a solution could be found. The Durand Line would then be a zone rather than a fixed border, and would formally continue to exist. We want an open exchange

between people on both sides, without border controls, and with freedom of movement, similar to what Europeans have achieved today between Germany and France.”

Read the full transcript of Karzai’s interview with Spiegel titled [We Afghans Are Just Being Used Against Each Other](#). The point is, there is deep anguish among the Afghan elite that once again a “settlement” is being imposed on their nation by outside powers.

Nonetheless, Qureshi has made a good beginning to rebuild bridges in the Beltway. A [Voice of America commentary](#) says,

“US efforts to solidify plans for what comes next appear to have taken on renewed urgency in recent days, leaning on outreach from the White House and the Pentagon to overcome a decade of strained ties and start to win over Pakistani officials.

“Already, US officials have voiced some optimism that an initial meeting between US national security adviser Jake Sullivan and his Pakistani counterpart, Moeed Yusuf, on Sunday in Geneva, [went well](#)...

“The Pentagon, likewise, expressed confidence following a call early Monday between US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin and Pakistan’s Chief of Army Staff, General Qamar Javed Bajwa. The [Pentagon readout](#) said, “The secretary reiterated his appreciation for Pakistan’s support for the Afghanistan peace negotiations and expressed his desire to continue to build on the United States-Pakistan bilateral relationship.”

But then, just as Qureshi concluded his visit, External Affairs Minister J. Jaishankar landed in the US. And, India-Pakistan diplomatic ties continue to deteriorate. New Delhi is deeply sceptical about the growing consensus internationally that Pakistani policy in Afghanistan shows signs of strategic shift — that Islamabad no longer wants a Taliban-dominated future Afghanistan as its next-door neighbour. Indians insist that it is all smoke and mirrors.

However, India is hardly in a position to assert on the Afghan chessboard. The government is entrapped in a pandemic with no end in sight. Jaishankar’s agenda is heavily dominated by discussions with the American side relating to vaccines. Again, India has [a tense border situation with China](#) and the Sino-Indian relations are in a state of free fall, as New Delhi selectively intensifies its engagement with those world capitals that share its concerns over China’s rise and are willing to push back — the US, the UK, EU, QUAD, etc. — at the centerstage of its foreign policy.

The bottom line is that New Delhi is highly unlikely to do anything that may undermine the US strategy in Afghanistan, which, incidentally, also has an “Indo-Pacific” dimension to it. Incidentally, with a twinkle in his eye, Khalilzad expressed total confidence during the House hearing last week that the US has the capacity to return to the Bagram base “very quickly”, when lawmakers reminded him that Bagram is the “only base the US has on the borders of China”. He advised the lawmakers to consult the Pentagon.

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Featured image: Afghan children walk past a Taliban Red Unit, an elite force, Alingar district, Laghman

province in eastern Afghanistan (File photo)

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