The Afghan Conflict and Afghanistan's Relations with Pakistan

In the last year Islamabad has entered into dialogue with Kabul as part of its talks with the USA.

This area of Pakistan's foreign policy is dominated by the country's military. The involvement of the armed forces in foreign policy is a characteristic feature of the country's domestic political development. Another key feature of this development is the fact that now, in 2019, for a number of different reasons, Islamabad is no longer intimidated by US sanctions and threats. However, this does not mean that it has stopped listening to the White House.

The main goal of Donald Trump's administration in Afghanistan is to bring an end to the conflict and achieve a victorious withdrawal of US and NATO troops from the country, while also avoiding the risk of attacks by armed terrorist groups on US citizens, that is, to eliminate the risk of a repeat of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001.

This period has seen a complete change in Washington's approach to Islamabad: in 2017-18 Donald Trump was accusing Islamabad of sheltering leaders of the Afghan Taliban and threatening to launch coalition military strikes against Afghan militants in Pakistan, but in December 2018 he wrote a letter to Imran Khan, the Pakistani Prime Minister, requesting his support in the organization of talks with the Afghan Taliban.
The USA has persuaded Pakistan to play a more active role in the fight against terrorism, and has put pressure on its former ally in order to achieve this goal. For example, the White House has gone back on its promise to provide Pakistan with financial and military aid, has put increased pressure on the International Monetary Fund, and, in August 2018, it refused to allow Pakistani military servicemen to study in US military academies, although a quota for such placements had already been agreed. But Pakistan did not give in to the pressure.

The change of course in the USA's Afghan policy was a response to the failure of its previous strategy in Afghanistan and South Asia (August 2017) which focussed on achieving a military solution to the Afghan civil conflict. The revised strategy (June 2018) put the emphasis on promoting talks in order to settle the crisis through negotiation.

The ongoing military campaign, which started in 2001, has cost Washington more than a trillion dollars and many thousands of lives. Despite these losses, Donald Trump has declared that the USA will bring the anti-terrorism campaign to a successful end. In view of the fact that he has only two years of his presidential term left, it is likely that 2019 will see a large number of developments, both diplomatic and military, in the USA's policy in relation to Pakistan and Afghanistan.

Now, in 2019, the military stand-off between the armed opposition and the Coalition forces is so entrenched that neither the Taliban nor the Kabul government, with its current level of support from US and NATO troops, are able to achieve a strategic victory. The military victory of the Taliban will be dissolved, as neither the USA nor any of the national governments in the region, see any future for the Taliban. In view of this stalemate, the parties to the conflict, as well as the main regional powers, have come to appreciate the necessity of finding a negotiated solution to the conflict.

The main features that characterize the negotiations between the USA and the Afghan Taliban are as follows:

- the USA, despite refusing to do so for many years, has agreed to take part in direct talks with the Afghan Taliban;
- the Afghan Taliban refuses to take part in any direct talks with the Afghan National Unity Government;
- the parties to the conflict have accepted that the talks between the USA and the Afghan Taliban are impossible, unless Pakistan is also invited to participate and serve as a guarantor that the talks will go ahead.

Pakistan has two main strategic goals in the negotiations to regulate the Afghan conflict: a domestic goal and a regional one.

Islamabad's main motive in supporting the negotiations between the USA and the Afghan Taliban is its fear of the regional instability that could result from the USA's departure from Afghanistan (large numbers of Afghan refugees and narcotics, an increase in the number of terrorist organizations and the spectrum of their activities etc.).

Pakistan's national security is threatened by the activities of a number of groups, including the separatist Balochistan Liberation Army, and militants from Lashkar-e-Jhangvi and the Pakistani Taliban, who are based in Afghanistan but carry out attacks in Pakistan. The Pakistani Taliban, taken together with its allied organizations, has a total of between 3,350 and 4,200 militants. According to local press reports, the Pakistani Taliban is collaborating together with DAESH (a terrorist organization which is banned in Russia). In Pakistan these militants carry out attacks on army, police and government facilities and buildings, as well as on those belonging to religious and ethnic minorities. For example, there has been an increase in attacks in tribal areas in the south of the country, including in the major port and large city of Karachi.

As part of the negotiation process, Kabul has promised Islamabad that it will work together with its neighbor to repatriate Pakistani Taliban militants. There are fears that if the de-radicalization program in Afghanistan is not successful then these militants may join DAESH. Rawalpindi, the city where Pakistan's army headquarters is based, has been leading a program to integrate former militants from various armed opposition groups into peaceful society since 2009.

The Pakistani Taliban has also assured Pakistan that it will break off its links with other militant organizations, stop sheltering foreign militants, and, most importantly, it has agreed not to do anything that interferes with Pakistan’s interests.

The success of the talks in Afghanistan between the USA and the Afghan Taliban is important to Islamabad for another reason: it will help it counter the new challenges it is facing, one of the most important of which is to neutralize the Pashtun militant group Tehreek-i-Labbaik Pakistan. This group arose spontaneously during mass
protests by Pashtuns following the killing of a young Pashtun man in Karachi in January 2018, and by January 2019 the group was still holding ground, had organized itself and was issuing demands in relation to social, administrative and political matters. This was the first time in Pakistan’s history that a Pashtun movement had been formed, and its existence is of great concern to the national government, as mass demonstrations in one region could spark off separatist movements throughout the country.

Even though very little time has passed since Donald Trump’s letter to Imran Khan, the Pakistani Prime Minister, improvements can already be seen in the relations between the two countries. In December 2018 Pakistan opened up the Torkham border crossing again: for a number of reasons it had been closed for all but a few months in each year since 2016. Torkham and Chaman are the main border crossings between Afghanistan and Pakistan, and their closure had dramatically reduced the amount of trade between the two countries. This trade, mostly in seasonal fruit and vegetables, had dropped from $2.3 billion in 2015 to $800 million by September 2017. According to Islamabad, the border crossings were closed because they needed to be modernized, and also so that 900 km of fences could be erected along sections of the 2,500 km border.

The other questions that remain unresolved include the repatriation of Afghan refugees, the liberalization of the visa regime between the two countries, the problem of people crossing the border illegally, and the renewal of bilateral parliamentary and business contacts and visits. It is hard to resist the conclusion that finding a solution to the Afghan civil conflict is in Pakistan’s national interests and important for its security.

Some of the leaders of the Afghan Taliban live in Quetta, the capital of Pakistan’s Balochistan province, while a smaller number live in Karachi. And it is a well-known fact that as long as Taliban leaders are based in Pakistan, Islamabad has a certain amount of influence over them. Islamabad has, in recent months, been putting pressure on these leaders and on their relatives, in an attempt to persuade the Afghan militants to enter into dialogue with the USA. If the militants refuse, the Pakistan has threatened to break off links with the Afghan Taliban, including with the Quetta Shura, the council of Taliban leaders.

Pakistan is cooperating with Washington and complying with its requirements, in order to ensure that the talks between the USA and the Afghan Taliban take place successfully. For example, in October 2018 Pakistan released Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar from prison. Baradar is a close confidant of Mullah Omar, the Emir of the self-styled Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (1996 – 2001). By arresting him in Karachi, in February 2010, the Pakistani authorities probably saved his life, and also gained a useful bargaining counter: his release helped to pave the way for the talks between the USA and the Afghan Taliban. And in the second stage of the talks, scheduled for February 25, 2019, the Afghan Taliban delegation will be headed by Abdul Ghani Baradar, whose primary allegiance is to the former Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, and only after that, to the Afghan Taliban. The matters he will be raising include questions relating to the settlement of relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan, including Kabul’s recognition of the Durand Line as the border between the two countries.

The peaceful settlement of the Afghan civil conflict also has international implications for Islamabad, which hopes that the talks between the USA and the Afghan Taliban will reduce the intensity of Kabul’s hybrid war against its neighbor to the south. Pakistan is equally concerned to reduce India’s influence in Afghanistan, a subject Islamabad has mentioned to Washington on a number of occasions.

Pakistan is also concerned about its image: it needs to be seen as a safe and prosperous country, particularly because its government has been working on the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor project, part of China’s One Belt, One Road initiative, since March 2015. Washington was highly critical of China during the first few years of the OBOR initiative, when the necessary facilities were being constructed: it sees this infrastructure project as a sign of Beijing’s rise as a great economic power. More recently the USA has toned down its criticism, but Washington is nevertheless hatching plans to “stay” in the region and to block China’s transport routes, if it can.

Pakistan’s involvement in the organization of the second round of talks between the USA and the Afghan Taliban can be summed up simply: it is trying to persuade the Taliban to take part in dialogue with representatives of the Afghan National Unity Government. This is no easy task for Islamabad. For example, at the beginning of February 2019, Ashraf Ghani, the Afghan President, voiced his support for protesters in Pakistan’s Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan Provinces. Pakistan’s Foreign Ministry saw these comments as an unacceptable interference in the Pakistan’s internal affairs.
It is now only a few days until the next round of talks between the USA and the Afghan Taliban is due to begin, on February 25, 2019. But we are already hearing comments from certain quarters that the negotiation process is likely to end in a stalemate. The USA considers that it has already made too many major concessions to the Afghan Taliban, it is not prepared to comply with the conditions suggested by Mullah Baradar, and it is demanding a ceasefire and a peace settlement before it withdraws Coalition troops from the country.

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