



شبكة الجزيرة  
ALJAZEERA NETWORK

# **Dialogue with the Taliban**

## **Pakistan's attitude towards Obama's plan to negotiate with the Taliban**

***Dr. Ijaz Shafi Gilani\****

**February 2010**



U.S. President Barack Obama's plan to negotiate with the Taliban in Afghanistan has generally been welcomed in Pakistan. It is being seen as a vindication of the Pakistani government's long-held position that a solution to the Afghan problem should be sought through a combination of political and military means. The turmoil in Afghanistan has weighed heavily on Pakistan – more than on any other external actor related to the Afghan conflict. Thus Pakistan is genuinely keen to achieve a peaceful and stable neighbour. Its concern is to ensure that any plan for dialogue is carried to its logical conclusion, and that it does not collapse prematurely.

Pakistan's positive reaction to Obama's dialogue plan is strongly motivated by its understanding that it is part of a larger American exit strategy. The exit strategy, which emerged from Obama's review of the Afghan war, has changed American attitudes towards regional actors. The new policy recognises Pakistan's critical role, and seems to address its key concerns on the conflict. Pakistan's foreign policy and military doctrine continue to be India-centric; hence a key motivation for Pakistan to support the revamped Obama plan is the diminished role of India in the new American policy. Pakistan looks on this as a major strategic gain. It also views favourably the prospect of providing training facilities to future Afghan military and police forces. The symbolism associated with the issue is also important; Pakistan feels a change in the American tone in its dealings with her to one where she is treated with more dignity. Pakistani public opinion feels a change from the contemptuous behaviour of the Bush era in which U.S. officials repeatedly charged Pakistan with "duplicity" and admonished it to "mend its ways" and "do more". Pakistan is now being courted to assist in America's exit strategy. On the domestic front, Pakistan hopes dialogue with the Afghan Taliban will help address its local "Taliban problem".

Can these pious hopes be brought to fruition? The answer will depend on consistency in policy on both the American and Pakistani sides, and their ability to develop an operational infrastructure to implement the new policy.

The fundamental question is: can Pakistan be America's key partner to ensure its own exit from Afghanistan's treacherous mountains. After all, Pakistan has a track record of success. Twenty years ago, Pakistan was America's key ally to ensure a Soviet exit from the same land. Can the two draw upon the successes and failures of that earlier episode?

## **A stick and carrot strategy**

When U.S. President Nixon decided to exit Vietnam, he called his policy: “Peace with Honor”. Former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger took pains in his writings on that period to explain how his bombing missions during the closing days of the war were combined with secret negotiations with the North Vietnamese in Paris. Using the “stick and carrot” is an established methodology for fighting wars, especially in their closing days. The American war in Afghanistan seems to have entered that phase.

Americans have reluctantly recognised the Taliban as a credible force both militarily and politically, and are seriously considering the prospect of a post-American Afghanistan for which they should enter into negotiations, possibly within a multi-track framework. Reports suggest this process started a few years ago and was formally announced to a gathering of key stakeholders in London at the end of January 2010. Despite U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton’s reluctance to call it by that name, the summit appeared to the rest of the world as the formal recognition of an exit strategy. Obama’s December 2009 announcement of a troop surge was Part One of the exit strategy (*the stick*), and the London conference is Part Two (*the carrot*).

According to official sources, the aim of the London conference, co-hosted by the UK, UN and Afghanistan, was to agree on a clear international plan for the next 18 months, and to move towards an ultimate transition of power to established local authorities. The concluding communiqué declared the conference a “decisive step towards greater Afghan leadership to secure, stabilize and develop Afghanistan”.

## **Reactions in Pakistan**

When examining the reactions of Pakistani policy makers and key commentators, we note that Part One of the strategy was received cautiously and with a negative tilt. Pakistanis did not favour a strategy that relied on military action alone, and instead counselled that this strategy should be combined with negotiations. Since Obama announced his troop surge, a series of regional meetings were held. These included a trilateral meeting in Islamabad (Afghan, Iranian, and Pakistani foreign ministers), Istanbul (Afghanistan, Turkey, and

Pakistan), and another meeting in Istanbul attended by all Afghanistan's neighbours. (India was excluded from this meeting because of Pakistan's reservations.)

In contrast to its response to Part One, Pakistan's reaction to Part Two seems to be positive, even enthusiastic. Most Pakistani commentators view the position taken in London as a vindication of what Pakistan has been advising for some time. But the enthusiasm hinges mostly on the conference's recognition that, as far as Afghanistan is concerned, Pakistan is a far more central role-player than India. With these developments, Pakistan has emerged as a pivotal player, openly asserting its reservations regarding Indian involvement in post-war Afghanistan. Pakistan's foreign minister, Mahmood Qureshi, believes that since India has no border with Afghanistan, it does not fit into the scheme, except in a developmental role. Pakistan regards the London conference as a recognition of its position that Indian involvement in Afghanistan was a source of trouble for rather than support of American aims, because India fuelled unrest in parts of Pakistan bordering Afghanistan.

Pakistan's official reaction to the new American move is embedded in statements of her army chief, General Ashfaq Kayani, made during and after his visit to NATO headquarters in Brussels in January. He underlined, firstly, that Pakistan's foreign policy remains India-centric and, therefore, an Afghan policy which puts India at an advantage in the region at the expense of Pakistan's influence was not acceptable. Secondly, he emphasised, Pakistan continues to seek a role in Afghanistan but with a notable change: Pakistan will not attempt to dominate Afghanistan and was willing to reconsider and renounce its policy of seeking "strategic depth" in Afghanistan.

The notion of "strategic depth" has long been the cornerstone of Pakistan's military doctrine on its western borders. While the question of changing this policy might appear inconsequential to some political observers, it is likely to have a significant impact on military thinking and practice. If Afghanistan "is peaceful, stable and friendly, we have our strategic depth because our western border is secure," said Kayani. The clarity of the explanation by the head of Pakistan's army signals the emergence of a revised strategic doctrine in Pakistan.

Thirdly, the Pakistani establishment is distancing itself from what many believed was its policy of considering the Taliban as a strategic asset to compensate for its disparity with India

in other aspects of military balance. Responding to the oft-repeated charge of duplicity on the issue of fighting or supporting the Taliban, Pakistan's leadership argues: "If we can demonstrate our ability to subdue the Pakistani Taliban in Malakand, our stated position of being opposed to the entire Taliban movement should be seen as credible."

## **Pakistan's cost and benefit perceptions**

Pakistan's positive reaction to the Obama plan hinges on a cost-benefit analysis based on the following:

1. The U.S. has finally signalled that it is willing to partner with, rather than dictate to, Pakistan. Commentators observed that Pakistan's demonstration of independence in discussions on the Kerry-Lugar Bill and the subsequent assertion of its sovereignty, specifically regarding American activities in Pakistan, and passage rights to NATO supplies, convinced the Americans that dictation will not work. The U.S. and NATO need Pakistan, and, hence, the argument suggests, Pakistan can claim greater respect and reciprocity. This benefit will loom large in Pakistani calculations of costs and benefits.
2. Pakistan's wish list from the new relationship contains at least three key elements:  
**Firstly**, it would like the U.S. either to exclude India from the Afghan issue or to retain it in a diminished role. Pakistan certainly wishes to exclude India from any military role (including the training of soldiers) in Afghanistan. Pakistani commentators happily note that the U.S. and NATO are inclined towards a reduced role for India. This recognition is not lost in India where leading commentators have noted the change and have called for a review of India's Afghan policy.  
  
**Secondly**, Pakistan is keen to cooperate with the U.S. to train the Afghan army and the police, and to offer its training facilities for this task. The London conference called for an Afghan army of nearly 170,000-strong and a 130,000-strong police force. The current state of the Afghan army and police is rudimentary, and Pakistan has already expressed a willingness to cooperate with the Americans and NATO in training.

**Thirdly**, given its Afghan experience and relationships with all the stakeholders, Pakistan is keen to play a role in negotiating with the Taliban, thus becoming a pivotal facilitator of Obama's exit strategy. Pakistan hopes that peace in Afghanistan will help restore the writ of its own government in areas bordering Afghanistan. It is presently compromised by both domestic and international intrusions. Pakistan will thus view this as a key benefit.

## **Building national consensus**

Pakistan's military appears to be working on a strategic doctrine, which is partly a continuation of the past and partly a revision. According to General Kayani, the concept of "strategic depth" in Afghanistan is being replaced by the notion of a "stable, unified and peaceful Afghanistan". This new approach should be followed through consistently and its comprehension should permeate all relevant levels of stakeholders – including parliament. Given its importance for Pakistan's internal and external stability, there should be an open and transparent discussion on "Pakistan's new Afghanistan policy" with room for disputation. All the evidence suggests that there is a broad Pakistani national consensus on the key contours of a new Afghanistan policy, these being that:

1. Pakistan does not need "strategic depth" in Afghanistan but needs a stable, unified and peaceful Afghanistan.
2. Pakistan is willing genuinely to partner with the U.S. to ensure the latter's exit from Afghanistan. Unlike the post 9/11 policy of distrust and alleged duplicity with the U.S., it is willing to adopt a mutually-acceptable, open and unambiguous approach.
3. Pakistan will partner with the U.S. as it did during the Soviet occupation, but will refuse to be bullied as a subservient actor, nor be coerced to cooperate for fear that America will play its India card. Pakistan's willingness, during the last decade, to self-destruct rather than be subdued should be convincing enough that while Pakistan can be an effective partner, it is a failure at playing a subservient role.
4. Despite differences on the cultural and political positions of Taliban, there is wide consensus in Pakistan to oppose the militancy of any Taliban group. Pakistan is

opposed to the militancy of Taliban on both sides of the border while recognising its role as a legitimate political player and allowing it fair opportunity to be part of broad-based politics. Pakistan will not partner with the U.S. in order to use dialogue to destroy a non-militant Taliban movement. It would be arrogant to distinguish between “good” and “bad” Taliban, except on grounds of their observing the “rule of law” as opposed to the “rules of militancy”. Pakistan’s political history suggests low popular appeal for a Taliban approach to politics. But that is a matter which should not influence the right of the Taliban to be social and political players within the framework of rule of law and politics without weapons.

5. Pakistan will approach its new Afghanistan policy within its larger transition to the rule of law, good governance and a policy of greater tolerance for social and political diversity.

### **Building institutional infrastructure for the new policy**

Pakistan has a strong legacy of institutions which managed its Afghanistan policy during the Soviet occupation. Parts of that legacy might have been flawed, but it is a rich legacy which can be drawn upon. Informed by the mistakes of the past but drawing on its reservoir of individual and institutional strengths of that period, Pakistan should rebuild an institutional structure to operate a new and proactive Afghanistan policy.

### **Policy recommendations for Pakistan**

- Pakistan should stay on course in shaping a new Afghan strategy. The obsolescence of the concept of “strategic depth” in Afghanistan should be communicated with firmness and clarity to all internal and external stakeholders.
- Pakistan should continue reviving its role as a key regional player which can be a bridge between several concentric circles of stakeholders – including Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia and China. Pakistan successfully played that role in the 1980s but later lost it with changes of government. It is the most experienced non-western player on the Afghan issue, and once the misgivings between Pakistan and the U.S. diminish, Pakistan can revive its Afghan role and leverage several assets it inherited from its

involvement during the Soviet occupation. These include its long and deep relationships with all Afghan actors and an institutional ability in the military and diplomatic establishment to engage with them.

- Pakistan must also learn from its failings. It failed to help Afghans form a truly broad-based government in the early 1990s because it became over-ambitious, attempting to form a government of its own choice. Pakistan's failure was caused by its partisanship towards certain Afghan political factions. The success of its renewed role will hinge on its being an honest broker to help the Afghans achieve a balance of forces within Afghanistan, and to assist the Americans to make a safe exit.

It may be worth recollecting that the soviet exit from Afghanistan failed to bring peace because all external actors continued to push for the domination of their favourites in post-Soviet Afghanistan.

---

*\* Dr. Ijaz Shafi Gilani is the Chairman of Gallup Pakistan*