The Immutable Zero-sum Nature of the Indo-Pak Rivalry

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By Ehsan Ahrari

I. Introduction

Ehsan Ahrari writes that the shift in U.S. South-Asia policy that has occurred after September 11 has resurfaced the Cold War U.S. policy of treating India and Pakistan as equals. Once U.S. objectives of defeating and uprooting the Taliban and Al-Qaida have been accomplished, however, India and Pakistan are unlikely to be able to compete with China, Russia, or Europe for America's prolonged and heightened interest or engagement.

II. Essay By Ehsan Ahrari

"The Immutable Zero-sum Nature of the Indo-Pak Rivalry"
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The zero-sum nature of Indo-Pak relations with the United States-as a result of which whenever Washington moves closer to one nation, the other perceives it as highly deleterious to its own strategic interests-has never been so apparent as since the September 11 terrorist attacks on American soil.

Before September 11, U.S-India strategic ties were developing ever so smoothly. The focus of U.S. policy, then, was on development of the national missile defense (NMD) system, and renegotiation or even abandonment of the 1972 Antiballistic Missile Defense (ABM) Treaty for the purpose of developing the NMD. China was regularly, and fervently, described as a "strategic competitor." It was clear, then, that President George W. Bush was intent on confronting China, and the strategic partnership with India emerged as an important aspect of that policy. Another significant aspect of America's confrontational policy toward the PRC was his declaration that his administration would take whatever actions were necessary to protect Taiwan if China invaded it. Ignoring, if not

isolating, Pakistan was only an extension of the Bush Administration's policy toward South Asia. Unilateralism in the realm of foreign policy promised to become a hallmark of the Bush presidency.

The events of September 11 changed all that. The focus of the most radical shift in America's policy toward Asia was in South Asia. Within a matter of weeks, if not days, after that day of infamy, Pakistan emerged as an important partner in America's "war" on transnational terrorism. Economic sanctions on both Pakistan and India were also lifted, and the policy of confronting China was put in abeyance. Unilateralism was radically altered, if not completely abandoned in favor of building an international coalition to "combat" transnational terrorism.

From the perspective of India, the elevation of Pakistan's status became a painful reminder of the Cold War U.S. policy of treating both South Asian nations as equals. That policy was a source of irritation to India then. Now, as a rising power-and a nuclear one with a viable economy, whose average annual growth is around 5 percent, to boot-India is no mood to be treated as a "coequal" of Pakistan. But it understands that the United States is not likely to be sidetracked by the age-old Indo-Pak regional rivalry, at least while it is conducting a military campaign in Afghanistan. India also knows that the United States will not ignore the fact that Pakistan has systematically used Islamist groups as a potent tool of its policy of keeping the Kashmir dispute on the forefront of international attention. After declaring a "war" on transnational terrorism, Washington will not be able to make an exception in the case of Pakistan.

The Bush Administration is undoubtedly sympathetic to India's position on terrorism in Kashmir, a point that became even more clear in the aftermath of December 13 terrorist attack on India's parliament. However, since September 11, it has come to realize that Pakistan's insistence on the resolution of the Kashmir dispute must also be given serious consideration. Just how far the United States will go in translating that realization into an actual policy position is not clear, for now.

As the U.S. military actions in Afghanistan are winding down, it is also becoming apparent that the U.S.-India ties will continue to jell, and military-to-military contacts will become more visible than they have been anytime in the past. Even the Pacific Command (PACOM), which has often ignored India in the previous years, is reflecting the heightening interests of the U.S. civilian leadership by escalating its own contacts and exercises with the Indian military.

India is hoping, however, that the altered U.S. policies toward Pakistan will not result in Washington's insistence on playing the role of a go-between. New Delhi has consistently opposed the involvement of a third party in negotiations over the Kashmir dispute, fully recognizing that it would assign Islamabad a potentially advantageous position. Pakistan, to be sure, would only welcome such a U.S. role, preferably even a proactive one. Even a public and repeated American insistence on keeping alive the negotiating process on the Kashmir dispute is likely to become an irritant in the fledgling U.S.-India strategic partnership.

India was wary that Pakistan, largely because of its strong support of the U.S. military, might be given a veto power over the modalities of a multiethnic governing coalition in Afghanistan. The recently concluded Bonn Agreement has assuaged India's fears regarding a potential heightened Pakistan influence. However, given that that agreement has not fully put to test yet, India remains concerned that Pakistan might still be able to sabotage it by continuing to push for the increased participation of the Pushtoons in the post-Taliban government, thereby enhancing its own influence in that troubled country.

Overall, India's concerns over Pakistan are not totally unfounded. What both India and Pakistan are not considering is that the United States is likely to remain focused largely on defeating and uprooting the Taliban and Al-Qaida from Afghanistan, and perhaps in such other countries as

Somalia or the Philippines. Once those objectives are achieved, there is always that possibility that the United States might slip back into the pre-September 11 mode of viewing South Asia through the larger prism of U.S.-China rivalry. If that were to happen, India is concerned that is fledgling strategic partnership with the United States might be assigned a less significant role.

The immutable Indo-Pak rivalry is a major source of instability, even a potential nuclear war. However, in the very complex hierarchy of America's global interests, it has never rated very high. Now that both those countries are nuclear powers, the United States is likely to pay more attention to them. But they are not likely to compete with China, Russia, or Europe for America's prolonged and heightened interest or engagement. India has less to worry about being assigned a less significant role than Pakistan, however.

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