Obama Administration’s AfPak Strategy and Pakistan’s Counter-Terrorism Response

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Introduction

This paper seeks to evaluate Obama Administration’s evolving strategy towards Afghanistan and Pakistan, including its salient features and implications for Pakistan. It also attempts to analyze Pakistan’s counter-terrorism response, which has evolved in synchronicity with the new US policy. The study makes four principal arguments: First, the AfPak strategy is a major departure from Bush Administration’s counter-terrorism approach in the region, in terms of the US strategic goal, threat perception, counter-insurgency options, resource allocation, and the level commitment. Second, this strategy is presumed to evolve in accordance with the changing political and security realities in the two countries, although its review and policies formulated on its basis thus far are largely in conformity with the originally pronounced strategic principles. Third, given its evolutionary nature, and the fact that it aims to defeat al-Qaeda and its terrorist allies simultaneously in both Afghanistan and Pakistan, the new US strategy has greater scope for adapting to new political and security realities of the two countries, besides reinforcing and reshaping their respective counter-insurgency campaigns through a variety of cooperative mechanisms. Finally, Pakistan’s perception of the enormity of threat from largely home-grown terrorism and its recent successes against Taliban have enhanced the level of compatibility between the country’s counter-terrorism policy and new US counter-terrorism interests in the region. Given that, the paper concludes by foreseeing a promising strategic relationship between the United States and Pakistan, if the two countries are able to overcome the remaining areas of potential friction between them on the issue of tackling terrorism.

The pages ahead will first discuss in detail the salient features of the AfPak strategy, its evolutionary nature, review and scope of success. This will be followed by an analysis of the implications of the AfPak strategy for Pakistan, Pakistan’s counter-terrorism response to it and the areas of compatibility between the two. The concluding discussion will focus on the points of potential friction in US-Pakistan relations on the issue of tackling terrorism and the possibility of their resolution.

AfPak Strategy

That Barack Obama would bring about a qualitative shift in the US strategy towards Afghanistan and Pakistan was clear during the US election campaign. As a Democratic presidential contender, he had declared to make the war in Afghanistan his Administration’s top most priority. For winning this war, he promised to increase the number of US troops in Afghanistan and allow US forces to strike al-Qaeda terrorist targets in Pakistan’s tribal areas. In his opinion, the United States was fighting a “war of necessity” in Afghanistan. He criticized the Bush Administration for waging a “war of choice” in Iraq, because of which Taliban-led insurgency in Afghanistan had intensified in recent years. But he shared Bush Administration’s growing concern about Pakistan’s tribal areas having become a safe haven for al-Qaeda and its terrorist allies and fueling Afghan insurgency and threatening international terrorism. To him, Afghanistan and Pakistan constituted two theatres of the same war being waged to combat international
terrorism by al-Qaeda and its terrorist allies. Therefore, the war in Afghanistan could not be won without tackling the threat of terrorism from Pakistan. It was no surprise, therefore, that soon after assuming office on January 20, 2009, President Obama appointed Richard Holbrooke, who had skillfully negotiated the Dayton Peace Accords on Bosnia in 1995, as his Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan. Within three weeks, on February 10, 2009, he ordered a review of the US strategy towards the two countries by an Inter-Agency Group chaired by Bruce Riedel, his advisor on Afghanistan and Pakistan during the election campaign, and co-chaired by Mr Holbrooke and Michele Flournoy, the US Under-Secretary of Defense for Policy. Upon the completion of the said review, President Obama unveiled the new US strategy towards Afghanistan and Pakistan in a major speech on March 27, 2009.\(^1\) A White Paper of the Inter-Agency Policy Group’s Report outlining the basic elements of this strategy was also issued the same day.\(^2\)

The AfPak strategy, as it is generally abbreviated and was originally announced, constitutes the essential framework for Obama Administration’s subsequent policy initiatives towards Afghanistan and Pakistan and review of the Afghan war strategy. It offers a more focused US approach to combat against al-Qaeda-led international terrorism, treading “a middle path between a narrow counter-terror mission and a much more ambitious nation-building agenda.”\(^3\) In this section of the study, we shall first discuss salient features of the AfPak strategy as it was unveiled in March 2009 and then analyze the main components of Obama administration’s review of the Afghan war strategy in December 2009.

First, the AfPak strategy shifts the focus of war from Iraq to Afghanistan and Pakistan and treats them as two countries but one challenge. The reason Pakistan is bracketed with Afghanistan is because its tribal areas alongside the Afghan border are perceived by the Obama Administration to be a safe haven for al-Qaeda and its terrorist allies, fueling Afghan insurgency and threatening international terrorism. Under this perception, the threat the two countries face and the enemies they confront are common. As long as these enemies survive and the threat exists, the safety and security of the rest of the world, including the United States, from international terrorism cannot be guaranteed. The Inter-Agency Policy Group’s Report stated that “the ability of extremists in Pakistan to undermine Afghanistan is proven, while insurgency in Afghanistan feeds instability in Pakistan. The threat that al Qaeda poses to the United States and our allies in Pakistan— including the possibility of extremists obtaining fissile material - is all too real. Without more effective action against these groups in Pakistan, Afghanistan will face continuing instability.”\(^4\) The AfPak strategy, therefore, focuses more intensively on Pakistan than in the past, calling for more significant increases in US and international support, both economic and military, linked to Pakistan’s performance against terror. Additionally, it aims to engage Afghanistan and Pakistan in a new trilateral framework at the highest levels. Together in this trilateral format, the United States aims to enhance intelligence sharing and military cooperation along the border and address common issues like trade, energy, and economic development.
Second, the AfPak strategy is based on a “clear and focused” US strategic goal for Afghanistan and Pakistan: “To disrupt, dismantle and defeat al Qaeda in Pakistan and Afghanistan, and to prevent their return to either country in the future.”5 Bush Administration’s policy towards the region emanated largely from the fact that its overall goal was based on an abstract phrase of the ‘War on Terror,’ which could mean anything: installing Western-style democracy in Afghanistan, defeating Taliban, fighting Afghans, or waging a war against Muslims. Categorically stating the core US goal in the region is important for clarifying widely held regional perception that the US and NATO have a long-term strategic ambition to use their presence in Afghanistan for exploiting Central Asia’s vast oil and natural gas resources. The clear identification of the terrorist enemy implies that the US and NATO forces will leave the region as soon as the terrorist threat is eliminated. Another indicator of the US/NATO intension not to stay longer in the region than it is necessary is the AfPak strategy’s emphasis on involving regional players in the Afghan peace effort. Together with the United Nations, the Obama Administration aims to forge a new Contact Group for Afghanistan and Pakistan that brings together all who should have a stake in the security of the region, including ‘Central Asian states, the Gulf nations and Iran; Russia, India and China.’6

Third, the AfPak strategy supports reconciliation with those local Taliban and insurgents who are ready to surrender arms and dissociate from al-Qaeda and its hardcore allies. In President Obama’s words, “There is an uncompromising core of the Taliban. They must be met with force, and they must be defeated. But there are also those who’ve taken up arms because of coercion, or simply for a price. These Afghans must have the option to choose a different course.”7 Bush Administration’s strategy of treating al-Qaeda and the Taliban as synonymous brought these two diverse entities closer together, both ideologically and practically. Al-Qaeda got access to Taliban safe havens in Waziristan—and the Taliban learned lethal insurgency techniques such as suicide bombings from al-Qaeda. The idea of negotiating with less extremist elements among the Taliban is based on the experience of US and British forces in Iraq, where Sunni militias were paid and trained to fight their former al-Qaeda allies.8 While implementing this component of the AfPak strategy, President Obama signed the Defense Bill on October 28, 2009, which contained a new provision under which the US was to pay Taliban fighters who renounced the insurgency for “mainly protection of their towns and villages.”9

Fourth, the AfPak strategy shows a long-term US commitment to Afghanistan and Pakistan through significantly enhanced resource allocation for civilian development projects in the two countries. In his AfPak strategy speech on March 27, 2009, President Obama announced “to advance security, opportunity and justice—not just in Kabul, but from the bottom up in the provinces” through “ordering a substantial increase in our civilians on the ground” as well as with the help of “civilian support from our partners and allies, from the United Nations and international aid organizations.”10 In subsequent months, the Obama Administration has continued to dispatch US civilian experts to Afghanistan. It had originally set March 2010 as the deadline for filing in nearly 1,000 civilian positions in Afghanistan—including lawyers, agriculture and development experts and diplomats—but later moved it to the end of 2009. In November 2009, despite worsening security situation in Afghanistan, the US State Department claimed it was “on
For track” in meeting this deadline. During the Bush Administration, Afghanistan obtained billions in civilian assistance from the United States and the international community, but it did not make much of an impact on the ground, in developing the countryside or dissuading the farmers from poppy cultivation. That is why the Obama Administration has decided to dispatch hundreds of US civilian experts to Afghanistan and set stringent accountability criteria for the utilization of US and international civilian assistance by the Afghan government.

In the case of Pakistan, assisting the country’s capability to fight extremists is identified as an important objective of the AfPak strategy, including the provision of “increased US military assistance for helicopters to provide air mobility, night vision equipment, and training and equipment specifically for Pakistani Special Operation Forces and their Frontier Corps.” The US Department of Defense has already allocated roughly $400 million to train and equip the Frontier Corps and recently proposed a Pakistani Counterinsurgency Capability Fund, which would allocate $3 billion over the next five years to train and equip Pakistan’s army and paramilitary forces for a counterinsurgency mission. All of these efforts are likely to be accelerated and expanded within several years, provided Washington can supply more trainers, build new training facilities, and work closely with Pakistani and Afghan counterparts.

However, the thrust of the AfPak strategy is on providing substantial US civilian assistance to Pakistan for “long-term capacity building, agricultural sector job creation, education and training, and on infrastructure requirements,” as well as to support its efforts to “hold and build” in insurgency-ridden areas as soon as they are cleared of terrorist-insurgents. Strengthening US-Pakistan bilateral ties, implementing Reconstruction Opportunity Zones in Federally-Administered Tribal Areas, encouraging foreign investment in key sectors, such as energy, assisting Pakistan with developing a concrete strategy for utilizing donor aid, and garnering additional support for the country from international institutions, including the UN, the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank as well as from the international forum, Friends of Democratic Pakistan, are identified as other objectives to help Pakistan make a long-term economic recovery in the AfPak strategy. The Kerry-Lugar-Berman Act, under which the United States will provide $7.5 billion civilian assistance to Pakistan in the next five years, including $1.5 billion each year, is the most obvious example of the US resolve to help build Pakistan’s civilian sector—an objective that was never a priority for the Bush Administration, which preferred individual leadership over democratic institutions and military aid over civilian assistance.

The final important feature of the AfPak strategy is its support for the deployment of additional US troops in Afghanistan. This is the only area where the Obama Administration shares its approach to the Afghan war with that of the Bush Administration in its concluding months. Reconciliation with moderate insurgents and deployment of additional troops were two options exercised simultaneously in Iraq, resulting in considerable improvement in Iraqi security. The AfPak strategy incorporates such useful lessons of the Iraq war in Afghanistan. In fact, weeks before unveiling this strategy, on February 17, 2009, President Obama ordered the dispatch of 17,000 more US
combat troops to Afghanistan.\textsuperscript{15} Even though the AfPak strategy seeks to employ “all elements of international power—diplomatic, informational, military and economic,”\textsuperscript{16} exercising military force is considered to be absolutely essential to realize the core goal of disrupting, dismantling and defeating al-Qaeda and its hardcore allies in Afghanistan and Pakistan. The fact that adding 17,000 more US combat troops to the Afghan war theatre meant taking the battle to the enemy became aptly clear when 4,000 US troops along with 600 Afghan forces launched Operation Khanjar (sword strike) on July 2, 2009 in Helmand Province where, over the past two years, Taliban had been regrouping and regaining power from the British forces.\textsuperscript{17} Likewise, the Obama Administration intensified drone attacks in Pakistan’s tribal regions perceiving them for having become a safe haven for al-Qaeda and its terrorist allies to fuel Afghan insurgency and conduct international terrorism. As of late October 2009, half of the 82 such drone attacks since 2006 were carried out during the Obama Administration\textsuperscript{18}—a trend that sufficiently indicates as to how much seriously it takes the terrorist threat from Pakistan.

Unlike the Bush Administration, whose priority was to deploy more US and NATO troops for combat missions in Afghanistan, the Obama Administration seeks to build the Afghan security capacity through “a more rapid build-up of the Afghan Army and police up to 134,000 and 82,000 over the next two years.”\textsuperscript{19} On March 27, 2009, President Obama announced to send 4,000 more US troops for training Afghan security forces. However, in an assessment of the Afghan war submitted to President Obama in late August 2009, Gen. Stanley McChrystal, the commander of US and NATO/ISAF forces in Afghanistan, said the Afghan mission was significantly “under-resourced” and, therefore, 40,000 additional US troops would be required to protect the Afghan people, shore up the government and counter Taliban militants. The assessment suggested a much faster assumption of security of Afghanistan by the Afghans themselves through much quicker expansion of Afghan security forces and more radical increase in their number—up to 240,000 for Afghan army and 160,000 for Afghan police\textsuperscript{20}—than the numbers sought originally by the AfPak strategy. That Obama Administration wanted to quickly hand over the responsibility of Afghanistan’s security to the Afghans themselves as part of its exit strategy was clear from US Secretary of Defense Robert Gates’ September 2009 remarks about “the Afghan national security forces assuming a greater and greater role in controlling and protecting their own territory as we recede into an advisory capacity and ultimately withdraw.”\textsuperscript{21}

The Obama Administration had postponed its announcement on the issue of US troops’ reinforcement in Afghanistan until the country’s presidential elections were over. However, the controversial elections did not produce an outcome that President Obama desired: an Afghan government with a more popular base. The re-election of President Hamid Karzai certainly limited the AfPak options for overcoming problems of governance and development in Afghanistan. Yet the immediate nature of the insurgent-terrorist threat required a decisive military campaign, for which 68,000 US troops and 42,000 NATO troops were not enough.\textsuperscript{22} President Obama had already added 21,000 troops since assuming office. One of the important dilemmas facing him was that additional US troops’ reinforcement could lead to a corresponding surge in US troops’ casualty rate, thereby further eroding the public support to US engagement in the Afghan
The Helmand operation, for instance, resulted in the largest ever US and British troop casualties. 2009 proved the bloodiest year for US, British and NATO forces, killing close to 300 US soldiers and over 100 British troops. In July and August 2009 alone, 153 US soldiers died in Afghanistan. However, the major shift in US counter-insurgency strategy of “clear, hold and build” in Afghanistan that Gen. McChrystal proposed could tackle this dilemma. His assessment of the Afghan war suggested a focus on the volatile south and east of the country, emphasizing the protection of civilians even if it meant allowing individual militants to escape. The shift in strategy that Gen. McChrystal recommended accepted that some territory would be ceded to the Taliban, but calculated that these would be remoter areas of limited value. The payoff would be a much denser concentration of Western troops around areas of higher population, including cities, major towns and key infrastructure. It was with saturating numbers of troops that US forces produced dramatic improvements in security during the 2007 “surge” in Baghdad. And it was in the cities and towns that the message that Western troops could deliver security and economic benefit stood the best chance of finding a receptive audience.

As soon as Gen. McChrystal submitted his assessment of the Afghan war in August 2009, President Obama began an extensive review of the AfPak strategy. However, even while this review was under way, some elements of the counter-insurgency strategy proposed by Gen. McChrystal in his assessment were already operational in the war theatre. For instance, one of the first decisions Gen. McChrystal took taking over the command of US and NATO/ISAF forces in Afghanistan was to restrict the use of air-strikes, arguing that the United States risked losing the war if it did not reduce civilian causalities. In November 2009, when it appeared that British public support for the war was declining fast due to growing British troop casualties, Gen. McChrystal sought a radical alignment of British forces away from the frontlines of Helmand. The reason his Afghan war assessment and a new strategy for winning it won unanimous approval from NATO defense ministers in October 2009 was because it not only aimed to win the hearts and minds of the Afghan people but also sought to reduce troop casualties by making the defense of major population centers the primary goal of counter-insurgency as against the previously set objective of fighting the Taliban in remote areas.

The fact that US strategic outlook on Afghan war and Pakistan’s counter-terrorism role in the region has undergone a qualitative shift during the Obama Administration is amply clear from the salient features of AfPak strategy discussed above. It is important to understand that the AfPak strategy as it was originally announced in March 2009 was meant to be a “work in progress...intended to provide a framework, not a strait-jacket, for US policy. Questions such as the correct prioritization of US objectives; the level of and manner in which US diplomatic, military, intelligence, and economic resources should be deployed; and the appropriate sequencing and duration of US efforts” were left open for review. These questions were addressed during the 92-day review that Obama Administration conducted after receiving Gen McChrystal’s assessment of the Afghan war. During this period, President Obama convened nine sessions of his war council in the White House situation room, where he pressed his advisers to provide exhaustive details on the policy options. A number of issues such as eroding public support in the US and NATO countries for the Afghan war, the financial and human cost of this war...
and NATO’s reluctance in recent years to send additional troops to Afghanistan were factored in.\textsuperscript{28} As has been the case all along, the Obama Administration also consulted key US allies in the Afghan war effort, including leaders of NATO, Afghanistan and Pakistan. It was only then that President Obama announced the review of the AfPak strategy in a major speech at the US Military Academy at West Point in New York on December 1, 2009, which was titled “A New Way Forward in Afghanistan and Pakistan.”

Given the wavering public support for the Afghan war due to rising troop casualties and financial cost, especially in times of economic hardship, President Obama began his speech by underlying the justification for the war in the shape of worsening threat from al-Qaeda and its hardcore allies in Afghanistan. He underlined the progress that had been achieved in this war since the announcement of the AfPak strategy in March 2009, saying: “High-ranking al-Qaeda and Taliban leaders have been killed, and we’ve stepped up the pressure on al-Qaeda worldwide. In Pakistan, that nation’s army has gone on its largest offensive in years. In Afghanistan, we and our allies prevented the Taliban from stopping a presidential election, and -- although it was marred by fraud -- that election produced a government that is consistent with Afghanistan’s laws and constitution.” However, he added that the grave terrorist challenge from al-Qaeda and its hardcore allies in the region to US and international security from the region had not yet disappeared. And then he announced the most important component of the long review of Afghan war strategy: the decision “to send an additional 30,000 U.S. troops to Afghanistan. After 18 months, our troops will begin to come home. These are the resources that we need to seize the initiative, while building the Afghan capacity that can allow for a responsible transition of our forces out of Afghanistan.”

While reiterating the previously-declared “narrowed down” core goal of the AfPak strategy—“to disrupt, dismantle, and defeat al Qaeda in Afghanistan and Pakistan, and to prevent its capacity to threaten America and our allies in the future,” President Obama laid down its three core elements: “A military effort to create the conditions for a transition; a civilian surge that reinforces positive action; and an effective partnership with Pakistan.” The objectives underpinning these core elements were to be achieved in three ways: First, by pursuing “a military strategy that will break the Taliban’s momentum and increase Afghanistan’s capacity over the next 18 months.” For the purpose, 30,000 troops were to be deployed at “the fastest possible pace in the first part of 2010 to ‘target the insurgency and secure key population centers.’” They will be joined by additional troops from NATO. “Taken together, these additional American and international troops will allow us to accelerate handing over responsibility to Afghan forces, and allow us to begin the transfer of our forces out of Afghanistan in July of 2011,” the US President said.

Second, building upon the previously-stated AfPak strategy’s principle of civilianizing the Afghan war effort, President Obama declared that the United States would “work with our partners, the United Nations, and the Afghan people to pursue a more effective civilian strategy, so that the government can take advantage of improved security.” However, he once again made clear that this “s effort must be based on performance.”
meaning that US civilian help to Afghanistan would be linked to its performance to “combat corruption and deliver for the people.” He assured the Afghan people that his country was interested in ending the war and their consequent suffering and not “in occupying your country.” For the purpose, the US President reiterated the US support to “efforts by the Afghan government to open the door to those Taliban who abandon violence and respect the human rights of their fellow citizens.” Finally, in his speech, President Obama reinforced the argument that his administration has made all along, that of treating Afghanistan and Pakistan as part of the same challenge: “We’re in Afghanistan to prevent a cancer from once again spreading through that country. But this same cancer has also taken root in the border region of Pakistan. That’s why we need a strategy that works on both sides of the border.”

He said, “In the past, there have been those in Pakistan who’ve argued that the struggle against extremism is not their fight, and that Pakistan is better off doing little or seeking accommodation with those who use violence. But in recent years, as innocents have been killed from Karachi to Islamabad, it has become clear that it is the Pakistani people who are the most endangered by extremism. Public opinion has turned. The Pakistani army has waged an offensive in Swat and South Waziristan. And there is no doubt that the United States and Pakistan share a common enemy.” The US President continued, by highlighting why his administration perceives Pakistan as a strategic partner: “In the past, we too often defined our relationship with Pakistan narrowly. Those days are over. Moving forward, we are committed to a partnership with Pakistan that is built on a foundation of mutual interest, mutual respect, and mutual trust. We will strengthen Pakistan’s capacity to target those groups that threaten our countries, and have made it clear that we cannot tolerate a safe haven for terrorists whose location is known and whose intentions are clear. America is also providing substantial resources to support Pakistan’s democracy and development. We are the largest international supporter for those Pakistanis displaced by the fighting. And going forward, the Pakistan people must know America will remain a strong supporter of Pakistan’s security and prosperity long after the guns have fallen silent, so that the great potential of its people can be unleashed.”

If, as a result of this escalation, Afghan security capacity building activity gains momentum, the Afghans living in major cities feel more secure, the casualty rate of Afghan civilians and foreign troops is significantly decreased, and a credible process of reconciling with moderate insurgents gets underway, then President Obama’s wish to “finish the job” in Afghanistan has a realistic chance of success. Obviously, all of these are big ifs. Implementing an exit strategy at the same time as ordering an escalation of the military campaign may seem contradictory. However, as already pointed out, the troops’ surge option is predicated on exercising a qualitatively different counter-insurgency campaign aimed at reducing Afghan civilian and foreign troop casualties, reconciling moderate insurgent forces and co-opting them in Afghanistan’s political and security structure, and transferring the country’s security responsibility to the Afghans themselves. Given the inherently evolutionary nature of the AfPak strategy, even if some elements of the revised war strategy did not produce the intended outcomes, they can always be modified or reformulated by the Obama Administration in consultation with
NATO and the governments of Afghanistan and Pakistan, as has been the case before. Given that, it can be safely argued that the AfPak strategy as it evolves further will have greater scope for adapting to new political and security realities of the two countries, besides reinforcing and reshaping their respective counter-insurgency campaigns through a variety of cooperative mechanisms.

Pakistan’s Response

It is an interesting coincidence that Pakistan’s proactive counter-terrorism campaign against al-Qaeda-linked TTP and other pro-Taliban groups in the Frontier and tribal regions of the country has evolved in synchronicity with the adoption of AfPak strategy by the Obama Administration and its subsequent implementation and review. In March 2009, President Obama announced the AfPak strategy, treating al-Qaeda-inspired Taliban insurgency-ridden areas of Afghanistan and Pakistan as one and expecting Pakistan to complement US troops’ surge in Afghanistan with a security operation in its own tribal areas. Within a month, Pakistan followed suit, with an air and ground assault on the Swat Valley. The period since then has seen intensified counter-insurgency campaigns on both sides of the border between Afghanistan and Pakistan, including the US-British military offensive in Helmand province and Pakistan Army’s operation in South Waziristan. The AfPak strategy aims to defeat al-Qaeda and its terrorist allies among Taliban and other insurgent groups. Pakistan’s consequent counter-terrorism response also confirms that the country’s civil-military leadership shares the US objective in defeating al-Qaeda-inspired Taliban, and other local and foreign terrorists in their north-western tribal strongholds.

Given that, the main argument in this section of study is that Pakistan’s perception of the enormity of threat from largely home-grown terrorism and its recent successes against Taliban have enhanced the level of compatibility between the country’s counter-terrorism policy and new US counter-terrorism interests in the region. Consequently, it can be argued that the areas of friction between Pakistan’s counter-terrorism offensive in the Frontier and tribal regions, and the US-led counter-insurgency campaign in southern and eastern Afghanistan may have considerably narrowed down. Before analyzing Pakistan’s counter-terrorism campaign and how it is compatible with US counter-terrorism goals in the region as stated in the AfPak, strategy it makes sense to discuss the implications of each of the five salient features of the March AfPak strategy, including its December 2009 review, for Pakistan—since the conclusions drawn from the following discussion will also suggest that the United States and Pakistan have more in common than is generally believed when it comes to combating terrorism in the region.

First, insofar as the question of hyphenating Afghanistan and Pakistan is concerned, Pakistan’s security establishment did express its reservation about it, while arguing “that there was a large difference between the situation in Afghanistan and that in Pakistan, and if the US tried to implement the same policy in Pakistan than it would not only yield negative results but it will also affect Pak-US relations.” Such reservation is understandable, since Pakistan as a fully functional nuclear-equipped state with a powerful army cannot be equated with a dysfunctional, war-ravaged state of Afghanistan being sustained through international security, political and economic support. Pakistan’s
security establishment also perceives a paradox in Obama Administration’s approach to linking the country with Afghanistan while, at the same time, refusing to re-hyphenate Pakistan with its arch rival India, as was the case throughout the Cold War period.

However, overtime, the benefits of linking Pakistan with Afghanistan seem to outweigh Pakistani establishment’s concerns about this linkage. One, it has facilitated cooperation between Afghanistan and Pakistani on combating terrorism. Instead of trading accusations against each other on cross-border terrorism, as was the norm before, the leaders of the two countries have regularly interacted with each other to address the common threat from terrorism together as well as at trilateral and multilateral forums. The Bush Administration had not established this linkage, and, therefore, it could neither persuade Pakistan to “do more” in the War on Terror, nor could it facilitate a cooperative relationship between Afghanistan and Pakistan. Two, like Afghanistan, Pakistan has started to receive international financial commitments, such as the US civilian aid package under the Kerry-Lugar-Berman Act and through the creation of a special multi-billion dollar fund by an international grouping called the Friends of Democratic Pakistan. Three, unlike the Bush Administration, which only pressured Pakistan to “do more” to prevent its tribal areas from fuelling Afghan insurgency, the Obama Administration has focused on facilitating Pakistan’s counter-insurgency efforts in the area through greater intelligence sharing and building Pakistan’s counter-insurgency capacity as well as through bilateral and trilateral cooperative mechanisms with Afghanistan.

Second, as for Obama Administration’s core goal of disrupting, dismantling and defeating al Qaeda and its hardcore allies in Afghanistan and Pakistan, it is the same goal that Pakistan’s civilian government and security establishment also wish to realize. Recent years have seen al-Qaeda-inspired insurgent-terrorist organizations, especially Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) play havoc with the lives of Pakistani civilians and security personnel. The country already has the distinction of arresting the largest number of al-Qaeda leaders and activists following the fall of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan in late 2001. The stated objective behind it military offensive in South Waziristan has also been to disrupt, dismantle and defeat al-Qaeda-linked TTP and other hardcore allies of the terror network, including terrorists belonging to Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU). Since the start of 2009, Pakistan’s security establishment seems to have realized the enormity of the threat posed to state apparatus and societal fabric by homegrown terrorist groups linked to al-Qaeda. Even before, its reluctance to go all out against the forces of religiously motivated insurgency and terrorism was only with reference to insurgent groups who were perceived to be operating without any linkage with al-Qaeda. That is why Taliban groups such as that of Mullah Nazir Ahmad in South Waziristan were used by Pakistan’s security establishment to fight against al-Qaeda-linked Uzbek terrorists in 2007.31

Third, reconciling with moderate insurgents—those who renounce violence, dissociate from al-Qaeda and willing to participate in the political process—is another important component of the AfPak strategy that is largely compatible with Pakistan’s counter-terrorism interests in the region. In Pakistan’s perception—shared equally by the security
establishment, civilian government and informed public opinion—the marginalization of Pashtun majority in the political, economic and security structure of post-Taliban Afghanistan is one of the main reasons for the growth of Taliban-led insurgency in the war-torn country. This implies that a credible process of reconciliation with the local forces of insurgency is the only viable option for a lasting resolution of the Afghan conflict. Since Taliban and other Afghan insurgents are essentially Pashtun, and thePashtun ethnicity straddling the long porous border between Afghanistan and Pakistan is an inescapable ground reality for both the countries, Pakistan cannot but support a process of reconciliation in Afghanistan that aims to address legitimate grievances of the Afghan Pashtun population. If and when such a reconciliation process begins in Afghanistan, it will provide Pakistan an opportunity to seek a negotiated outcome of its own counter-insurgency campaign in the tribal areas. Even otherwise, the security and economic cost of successive rounds of warfare in Afghanistan since 1979 has been most severe as compared to all other countries bordering Afghanistan. That is why Pakistan perceives the continuing conflict in Afghanistan as a major source of domestic insecurity and its negative social and economic consequences. Anything that brings an end to the war in Afghanistan is, therefore, commensurate with Pakistan’s interest.

Fourth, AfPak strategy’s focus on civilianizing the war effort is also an area where Pakistan’s counter-terrorism interest is compatible with that of the United States. If this helps stabilize the situation in Afghanistan, then this is a goal that Pakistan also aspires for, largely due to its own domestic security concerns. Afghanistan and Pakistan share the bitter experience of being abandoned by the United States in the aftermath of the 1980s jihad against the Soviets. The public opinion in Pakistan as a relatively functioning state unlike Afghanistan should naturally have been apprehensive about whether the country’s post-9/11 relationship with the United States to fight international terrorism would be strategic and long-term, or the United States would once again abandon it after the achievement of its relatively short-term strategic interests in the region. The AfPak strategy recognizes this “trust deficit,” while stating that the US government “must engage the Pakistani people based on our long-term commitment to helping them build a stable economy, a stronger democracy, and a vibrant civil society.”

Pakistan may have obtained billions of dollars of counter-terrorism military assistance from the United States in the years following the fall of Taliban in Afghanistan in late 2001, but the civilian assistance it received during the period pales in comparison to what the United States and the international community have pledged for Afghanistan at successive international donors conferences since then. This was despite the enormity of the terrorist backlash the country experienced during the period.

While recognizing Pakistan’s legitimate grievances in this regard, the Obama Administration has declared to engage the country on the basis of a strategic partnership “grounded in support for Pakistan’s democratic institutions and the Pakistani people.” The Kerry-Lugar-Berman Act, which formalizes this partnership, is a tangible manifestation of the broad support for Pakistan in the US, as evidenced by its bipartisan, bicameral, unanimous passage in the Congress. And the reading of this Act also makes it pivotally clear that after decades of coddling military dictators in Pakistan, Washington wants a different relationship with Islamabad, as the $7.5 billion in non-military aid for
the next five years, with a pledge of another such package afterwards, is essentially meant to help Pakistan's civilian government deliver essential services to its population, develop the country’s civilian institutions and infrastructure. The previous major US aid packages that Pakistan received were when the country was under a military rule, which somehow coincided with an increase in its regional strategic significance for Washington. For the first time in the history of US-Pakistan relations, the Obama Administration is attempting to transform a traditionally state-to-state/military-to-military relationship into a genuinely people-to-people one.

Yet the response from Pakistan to this unprecedented shift in US aid priority has not been as encouraging as the Obama Administration may have expected. When President Obama announced the AfPak strategy in March 2009, two different versions of what eventually became the Kerry-Lugar-Berman Act were before the US Senate and the House of Representatives. In his AfPak strategy speech, President strongly urged the Congress to move quickly on the said bipartisan legislation, as well as pass another bill “that creates opportunity zones in the border regions to develop the economy and bring hope to places plagued with violence.” On June 12, 2009, the House passed the Pakistan Enduring Assistance and Cooperation Enhancement (PEACE) Act of 2009, which was sponsored by Democratic Congressman Howard Berman, Chairman of the House Committee on Foreign Affairs. On September 24, 2009, the Senate passed the Kerry-Lugar Bill, which was co-sponsored by Democratic Senator John Kerry, who heads the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, and Republican Senator Richard Lugar. The PEACE Act had set more stringent conditionalities for Pakistan to qualify for US military assistance, which were a matter of concern for both the Pakistani government and the Obama Administration. These conditionalities were softened through a joint Congressional effort, following which the new changes were incorporated in the Kerry-Lugar Bill, before the Senate passed it. On September 30, 2009, the House of Representatives also passed this Bill, which became the Kerry-Lugar-Berman Act.33

The Kerry-Lugar-Berman Act does not impose any conditionalities on Pakistan for benefiting from $71.5 billion US civilian assistance each year from 2009 to 2013, with a pledge for a similar package for another five years. The aid is meant for improving the country’s education and health sectors, reforming its police service, expanding infrastructure, strengthening judiciary and democracy and developing other civilian sectors. However, the Act does impose conditionalities on “security-related assistance” to the country, which is what led Pakistan Army to openly express its reservation about the US intention behind it. This generated a huge controversy in Pakistan’s politics and media, with widespread accusations against the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP)-led government for its diplomatic failure to allow the passage of a Congressional aid bill for Pakistan that compromises the country’s national sovereignty.

As for the conditionalities, for Pakistan to acquire security-related assistance from the United States in future, the US Secretary of State will have to first to certify before appropriate congressional committees that “(1) the Government of Pakistan is continuing to cooperate with the United States in efforts to dismantle supplier networks relating to the acquisition of nuclear weapons-related materials, such as providing relevant
information from or direct access to Pakistani nationals associated with such networks; (2) the Government of Pakistan during the preceding fiscal year has demonstrated a sustained commitment to and is making significant efforts towards combating terrorist groups...including taking into account the extent to which the Government of Pakistan has made progress on matters such as—(A) ceasing support, including by any elements within the Pakistan military or its intelligence agency, to extremist and terrorist groups, particularly to any group that has conducted attacks against United States or coalition forces in Afghanistan, or against the territory or people of neighboring countries; (B) preventing al Qaeda, the Taliban and associated terrorist groups, such as Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish-e-Mohammed, from operating in the territory of Pakistan, including carrying out cross-border attacks into neighboring countries, closing terrorist camps in the FATA, dismantling terrorist bases of operations in other parts of the country, including Quetta and Muridk, and taking action when provided with intelligence about high-level terrorist targets; and (C) strengthening counterterrorism and anti-money laundering laws; and (3) the security forces of Pakistan are not materially and substantially subverting the political or judicial processes of Pakistan.”

Almost all of the conditionalities mentioned above correspond with Pakistan’s publicly pronounced foreign policy objectives and domestic political priorities. It is not that Pakistan army’s national or regional agenda is anyhow in conflict with any of the issues included in the above conditionalities. Since the unearthing of the A Q Khan nuclear smuggling network in 2003, the army, which essentially guards the country’s nuclear assets, has consistently assured the international community not to worry about the risks of nuclear proliferation from Pakistan. Pakistan’s civilian government and security establishment are likewise committed to combat terrorism in all of its forms and manifestations, and not to let terrorist groups use Pakistani territory to conduct terrorism abroad. Unlike his predecessor, Army Chief Gen. Ashfaq Pervaz Kayani also does not seem to have any intention of subverting the country’s civilian rule, since the army is yet to recover from the considerable loss of its societal image during the Musharraf regime and it is fully engaged in a military campaign against Taliban insurgents in the tribal areas. The army’s regional strategic concerns may be indicative of a dual counter-terrorism approach on its part—one that draws a distinction between domestic insurgent-terrorist groups linked to insurgencies in Afghanistan and Kashmir and those committing terrorism inside Pakistan. However, the recent wave of terrorism across Pakistan has been so deadly that it has become difficult to make such a distinction anymore, especially when a number of spectacular terrorist incidents in 2008 and 2009 allegedly involve the very Afghan-and Kashmir-specific militant groups such as Lashkar-e-Jhangvi and Jaish-e-Mohammed about the security establishment is believed to have had a soft corner in the past. Insofar as al-Qaeda and its affiliated groups such as TTP are concerned, the army has shown no reluctance in taking them directly or through its Taliban protégés such as Mullah Nazir in South Waziristan and Hafiz Gul Bahadur in North Waziristan.

Given that, the reason Pakistan army has expressed its reservations about conditionalities in the Kerry-Lugar Bill is not because the issues they raise somehow contradict its regional security agenda; rather, the real explanation for its reaction on the issue lies in Pakistan’s peculiar political context. In a country where the army has dominated politics
for most of its history and benefited mostly from US assistance, the imposition of such conditionalities was likely to upset the army leadership. That the inflow of US civilian assistance to the country was free of any conditionalities meant that Washington was taking sides in Pakistan’s civil-military divide and preferring its new partner in the counter-terrorism effort in the region, the civilian government, over its traditional partner for the purpose, the military establishment. Political stability in Pakistan depends largely on a relatively smooth working civil-military relationship; and without political stability, the country cannot be expected to effectively combat terrorism. The security assistance-specific conditionalities in the Kerry-Lugar Bill threatened to upset the precarious civil-military relationship and that is why the PPP leadership engaged in hectic diplomacy with its US counterparts, and, on October 14, 2009, secured a joint explanatory statement of the US Congress attached to the Kerry-Lugar-Berman Bill, as it was called after the House of Representatives passed it on September 30. On October 15, President Obama signed the Bill making it an Act. The Congressional statement said, “There is no intent to, and nothing in this act in any way suggests that there should be, any US role in micromanaging internal Pakistani affairs, including the promotion of Pakistani military officers or the internal operations of the Pakistani military.”

The explanatory note, which was issued jointly by the US House of Representatives and the Senate, also diluted the requirement that needed Pakistan to interrogate any Pakistani national involved in nuclear proliferation and to allow US officials access to such a person. A new clause included in the explanatory talked about “our understanding that cooperative effort currently being undertaken by the governments of Pakistan and the United States to combat proliferation will continue.” As for civilian control over military affairs, an issue that caused much of the controversy over Kerry-Lugar Bill, the explanatory note did not include words like “civilian executive leaders and parliament” exercising the power of “oversight and approval,” and the requirement that the military will not get involved in civil administration. It also stated that even the remaining requirement can be “waived if the determination is made by the Secretary of State in the interest of (US) national security that this was necessary to continue” military assistance to Pakistan. The Congressional statement clarified that the legislation “does not seek in any way to compromise Pakistan’s sovereignty, impinge on Pakistan’s national security interests, or micromanage any aspect of Pakistani military or civilian operations.”

In late October 2009, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton visited Pakistan. In her several public appearances and remarks, she acknowledged the existence of a “serious trust deficit” in US-Pakistan relations. She confessed that the United States made a mistake by abandoning strategic partnership with Pakistan after the Soviet defeat in Afghanistan, thereby contributing to Pakistan’s current terrorist quagmire. She assured Pakistanis that the United States was not pursuing yet another traditional state-to-state or government-to-government relationship guided by short-term, real-politick ambitions; rather, for the first time in the history of its relations with Islamabad, Washington was truly interested in long-term, strategic ties whose primary focus would be on strengthening people-to-people relations between the two countries. It was not merely a statement of intent on Secretary of State Clinton’s part, as she announced over $243 million US civilian aid, which will be in addition to $7.5 billion under the Kerry-Lugar-
Berman Act, to help improve Pakistan's energy generation and efficiency, raise the level of its higher education and meet some other urgent socio-economic needs.\textsuperscript{37}

It is still unclear as to how far the incorporation of the said explanatory note in the Kerry-Lugar-Berman Act and the US Secretary of State’s visit to overcome the trust deficit in Pakistan has alleviated the army’s concern over the conditionalities issue. However, since Pakistan’s civilian and military leaders know the crucial value of US and international financial and security assistance in fighting a protracted war against terrorists which has no early end in sight, they can be expected to cooperate with each other as well as with the United States as the country’s pivotal partner in this. Even otherwise, the conditionalities issue will become irrelevant, if the army’s counter-terrorism campaign in the tribal areas continues to make headway, and its scope expands further in response to the terrorist backlash from TTP and other insurgent-terrorist groups operating in tribal areas and parts of the Frontier and Punjab provinces. Moreover, top US military commanders regularly interact with Pakistan army’s high command, and this sustained interaction provides a framework within which security-related grievances of each side are addressed in a mutually-satisfactory manner.

A final implication of the AfPak strategy for Pakistan pertains to the deployment of additional troops by the US and NATO in Afghanistan in 2010 as part of the review of Afghan war strategy President Obama announced in December 2009. However, as stated before, the troops’ surge is only a short-term military means to facilitate a qualitatively different counter-insurgency campaign that places greater emphasis on expanding Afghan security capacity, reinforcing civilian development campaign and reconciling with moderate insurgent forces in Afghanistan. It is a military escalation that is essentially meant to prepare the ground for the eventual withdrawal of the US and NATO forces from Afghanistan and a political resolution of the Afghan conflict. Pakistan also wishes the same. Even if the deployment of additional US and NATO troops in Afghanistan leads to intensification in the counter-insurgency campaign in its southern and eastern areas, the only worry for Pakistan is the infiltration of Afghan insurgents into the country’s tribal regions bordering southern and eastern Afghanistan. However, since Pakistan’s security forces are themselves engaged in a resolute military offensive against Taliban in tribal areas, the runaway insurgents from Afghanistan may not find these areas as hospitable as was the case before. Even otherwise, heightened security campaigns across the Durand Line by Pakistan and US-NATO, respectively, would have a shared objective: to weaken the resolve of the terrorist-insurgent forces and, consequently, create moderate constituencies among them, who are willing to renounce violence, dissociate from al-Qaeda and its hardcore allies and participate in the political process largely on the terms of respective state parties and international forces.

Unlike its predecessor, the Obama Administration has preferred taking Pakistan on broad on the issue of combating terrorism through regular high-level consultations with its civilian and military leaders; rather than engaging in coercive diplomacy to force Pakistan to “do more” in the fight against terrorism in the region—as was the case with the Bush Administration, especially during its second term. For instance, President
Obama sent his National Security Advisor James Jones to Pakistan in November 2009 to consult its leadership about the US revised Afghan war strategy. He personally called President Asif Ali Zardari and took him in confidence before announcing the revised AfPak strategy in December 2009, while Mr Jones spoke to Prime Minister Yousaf Raza Gilani who was at the time visiting Germany. Mr Holbrooke’s frequent visits to Pakistan as a special envoy of the US President help to sustain cooperative spirit in US-Pakistan ties over the issue of terrorism, so does the regular interaction of top US commanders—including Gen. McChrystal, Central Command Chief Gen. David Petraeus, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Adm. Michael Mullen and Army Chief of Staff Gen. George Casey—with Pakistani military leadership. Whatever respective issues and concerns each side has on combating terrorism are mutually shared in these meetings. The intelligence chiefs of the two countries likewise meet regularly to coordinate their organizational activities. The regular diplomatic and political leadership level contacts between the two countries are aside. All of this is indicative of a proactive cooperation between the Obama Administration and the civilian regime in Pakistan, which is publicly visible. However, there are sensitive issues, such as the US drone attacks in tribal areas and the safety and security of Pakistan’s nuclear assets, over which some tacit understanding or cooperative arrangement may exist between the two countries’ civilian and security establishments, but they are not made public for fear of public backlash in Pakistan.38

However, the Obama Administration does sometime pressure Pakistan to deliver on terrorism according to US expectations. For instance, Secretary of State Clinton concluded her October 2009 visit to Pakistan by saying she found “it hard to believe that nobody in your government knows where they are and couldn't get them if they really wanted to.” “So far as we know,” she said, “they're in Pakistan.”39 Then, just a couple of days before President Obama announced the new US strategy for Afghan war, British Prime Minister Gordon Brown toed the US line by questioning “why, eight years after September 11, nobody has been able to spot or detain or get close to Osama bin Laden, nobody has been able to get close to Zawahiri...We have got to ask the Pakistani security forces, army and politicians to join us in the major effort that the world is committing resources to, not only to isolate al-Qaeda but to break them in Pakistan.”40 Since the fall of Taliban in late 2001, Pakistan has killed or captured over 700 suspected al-Qaeda leaders and activists, extraditing most of them to the United States, yet al-Qaeda’s two top leaders continue to survive allegedly somewhere along the Pakistan-Afghan border. If the United States suspects they are hiding in Pakistani side of the border, then obviously Islamabad will remain under US pressure to hunt them down. But, then, in the absence of credible intelligence information—which is relatively hard to come by in an inaccessible rugged mountainous area known for tribal Pashtun hospitality for the erstwhile Arab Mujahideen leaders—mystery will continue to shroud about the actual whereabouts of the two al-Qaeda leaders.

The only possibility for tackling this dilemma is through undertaking a final showdown against the forces of insurgency on both sides of the Durand Line. During the course of 2009, Pakistan in Swat and South Waziristan and the United States in Helmand province of Afghanistan did engage in such a showdown, which could overtime increase the chances of al-Qaeda leaders of being captured or killed by the security forces. Until then,
however, Pakistan’s failure to capture bin Laden and Al-Zawahiri will remain a major irritant in US-Pakistan relations. However, insofar as the country’s fight against Taliban and other al-Qaeda-linked groups is concerned, it has created more compatibility between the two countries on the issue of combating terrorism in the region than was the case during the second term of the Bush Administration. This is because Pakistan, in recent years, has seen terrorism becoming a pivotal danger to state apparatus and societal fabric and responded in kind by launching major military offensives against terrorist insurgent forces in the Frontier and tribal regions. The rapidity with which the terrorist events have occurred in the country from the summer of 2007 onwards has brought about a qualitative shift in the security situation and the security establishment’s subsequent response to it. The resolute counter-terrorism military offensive Pakistan army has waged against al-Qaeda-linked TTP and other terrorist-insurgent groups since the start of 2009 are indicative of this shift.

It is important to understand the domestic political and security context and recent historical background within which this shift has occurred. In March 2008, Pakistan’s present civilian regime inherited a country beset by terrorism. Prior to the Red Mosque operation in July 2007, the country had never experienced a wave of terrorism as it did from summer of that year onwards, targeting both security personnel and innocent civilians. In December 2007, former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto also became a victim of terrorism. There was surely some reprieve in terrorism on the eve of February 2008 election and, for some months, in its aftermath. During this period, as expected, being an elected government, it attempted to build political consensus for finding an amicable solution to the problem of terrorism. 

Since the first task before the newly elected leadership was to win over the public support for what Prime Minister Gilani said on March 29, 2008, as “Pakistan’s own war.” He also declared to make combating terrorism his government’s “No 1 priority” and adopt a “comprehensive approach” for combating terrorism. The Musharraf regime did cooperate with the United States in the War on Terror, but mostly under pressure and in a lackluster manner. It did deploy close to 80,000 troops in the tribal areas in spring 2004, but, subsequently, instead of undertaking sustained armed campaign against the Taliban, preferred to cut deals with their leaders. In a statement on March 25, 2008, former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, whose Pakistan Muslim League entered into a power sharing arrangement with the PPP in the Centre and the Punjab province, explained why Pakistanis perceived their country was fighting “America’s war:” “Pervez Musharraf used the war on terrorism to perpetuate his rule. No cabinet, no parliament was taken into confidence in any of his decisions. That is why it did not have popular support.” A sea change was, thus, visible in the country’s approach to counter-terrorism as soon as the elected government took over. Declaring to make the War on Terror as Pakistan’s own war implied that this war had to be fought indigenously since its repercussions had been indigenous. Given that, the issue was referred to a parliamentary committee set up for the purpose.41

In May 2008, the Awami Natonal Government in the Frontier province signed an agreement with the pro-Taliban Tehrik-e-Nifaz-e-Shariat-e-Muhammad (TNSM) in Swat. Earlier, Prime Minister Gilani had also offered an olive branch to Taliban, provided they agreed to renounce violence and join the political process. That deal collapsed, as
the PPP-led government in the Centre refused to own it. In fact, the same month the deal was concluded, the Federal government decided to intensify the security operation against Taliban in the tribal areas. After that, hell broke loose across Pakistan, as TTP undertook scores of devastating suicide bombings in cities, including the August 2008 attack outside the Wah Ordinance Factory and the September 2008 attack on the Marriott Hotel in Islamabad. TNSM also intensified its terror campaign against security personnel and common people in Swat. Consequently, in October 2008, a gathering of the Muttehadda Ulema Council at Jamia Naeemia, presided over by Maulana Dr Sarfraz Naemi, a renowned A’alim of the country’s majority Sunni-Barelvi sect, issued a unanimous fatwa declaring suicide attacks in Pakistan as haram (unlawful) and najaez (unjustified) under Islam. In a country with a religiously conservative population traditionally known for sympathizing with the Taliban, this was a crucial and unprecedented development.

Yet, the same month saw the country’s parliament unanimously passing a vague resolution, saying the militants posed a “grave danger” to the integrity of the state and pursuing dialogue with them should be “the highest priority.” This meant that politicians had still not abandoned the hope for tacking terrorism peacefully, even though TTP and TNSM had shown no inclination to renounce violence. Investigation into the Marriott attack revealed another bitter reality: that a Punjab-based Sunni sectarian group, Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, had joined ranks with Taliban in the terror campaign. In November 2008, Jamaat-u-Dawa, the front organization of the banned Lashkar-e-Taiba, known for its role in Kashmir militancy, introduced another irritant in the country’s fight against terrorism, by launching a devastating terrorist attack in Mumbai, and thereby jeopardizing the peace process between India and Pakistan.

While the Mumbai attack threatened to create a serious standoff in relations between the two traditionally hostile neighbours, TTP and TNSM continued their terrorist campaigns. The government could not sustain the mounting internal and external pressure, and caved in before TNSM in February 2009, by agreeing to introduce Nizam-e-Adl, a Shariah-based system in Swat, as demanded by the pro-Taliban group. This was despite all the death and destruction TNSM had caused in the region in the preceding months. This capitulation on the part of the government only encouraged TTP and its south Punjab affiliates to orchestrate the most lethal terrorist campaign in the country in subsequent months, beginning with attacks on Sri Lankan cricket team and Manawan Police Academy in Lahore in March 2009. In June 2009, Dr Sarfraz Naemmi was killed in a suicide attack in Lahore. The attack received nation-wide condemnation and helped build the much-needed political consensus in the country against terrorism, as Provincial Assembly of the Punjab, governed by Mr. Sharif’s PML, unanimously condemned the incident and voiced its support military operation against Taliban. For its part, TNSM declared to expand its Shariah cause to the rest of the country, while engaging in a beheading spree and publicly lashing a 17-year old girl. The video footage of the latter incident was broadcast on national media in March 2009, leading to public outrage against Taliban. TNSM militants also started to expand their activities beyond Swat, capturing parts of Dir and Bajaur region, located just 60 miles from Islamabad.46
It was in this backdrop that the country’s security establishment decided to act firmly against TNSM and TTP and launched Operation Rah-e-Rast in Swat in late April 2009. In early May, Prime Minister Gilani in a national address announced his government’s full support for this operation. Within months, the army routed TNSM, killing or capturing many of its key leaders. The army operation did generate a massive humanitarian crisis, displacing over a million people from the Swat valley and its adjoining regions, which was also successfully managed by the government and civil society with help from the UN World Food Programme (WFP). While TNSM was being wiped out in Swat, TTP continued its terror campaign from its base in South Waziristan, including a major one against Pearly Continental Hotel in Peshawar in June 2009. However, on August 3, the terrorist group suffered a mortal blow, as its leader Baitullah Mehsud, declared by the government as Pakistan’s “Public Enemy No. 1, was killed in a US drone attack. He was succeeded by Hakimullah Mehsud, Baitullah’s cousin and a relatively younger TTP leader. Under his leadership, TTP and its south Punjabi affiliates began to avenge the death of their leader by launching lethal suicidal missions in Bannu, Kohat and Peshawar and against WFP headquarters in Islamabad until early October 2009. Then, on October 10, TTP, with the help of Lashkar-e-Jhangvi terrorist leader Muhammad Aqil alias Dr Usman, launched a deadly terrorist operation on the Army’s General Headquarters in Rawalpindi. By attacking the nerve-centre of Pakistani military, TTP paved the way for a resolute military offensive against it—just as its affiliate TNSM had invited the wrath of the military by expanding its terrorist reach beyond Swat in early 2009. Soon after this attack, Prime Minister Gilani convened a national security conference, where government leaders, opposition politicians and military commanders unanimously decided to eliminate the terrorist threat from Taliban once and for all. It was in this backdrop that the army launched Operation Rah-e-Nijat in South Waziristan on October 17, 2009.47

In over two years of sustained terrorist activity until the start of this operation, TTP and its affiliates had claimed the lives of over 2,000 Pakistanis, including both security personnel and unarmed civilians. The terror campaign had ruined the country’s economy by scuttling domestic business activity and discouraging foreign investment. Taliban and other terrorist-insurgent groups had damaged Pakistan’s international reputation, and distorted the image of Islam. So, when the army’s two divisions advanced from three directions against TTP stronghold in South Waziristan, the military mission they were assigned to was meant to physically exterminate the enemy. In initial weeks, as TTP started to suffer considerable losses, its backlash was expressed in several suicidal acts of terrorism with multiple targets, including International Islamic University (October 20) and a busy market in Peshawar (October 28). The latter attack, which took place on the day Secretary of State Clinton arrived in Pakistan, killed well over 100 civilians, including women and children.48 However, by November 2009, as the federal and provincial governments tightened security in and around major cities and the army operation claimed more successes, the terrorist campaign waged by TTP and its affiliates had considerably waned. However, given the enormity of Taliban terrorism in recent years, there did not appear to be any short end in sight to the army’s protracted counter-insurgency campaign in tribal and Frontier regions—and so seemed to be the case with the consequent terrorist backlash for Pakistanis at large.
The above description about the evolution of terrorism in Pakistan and the factors underpinning the country’s response to it seem to prove that a number of ‘firsts’ have occurred insofar as how the security establishment, the civilian government and the society as a whole perceives the threat from terrorism and desires to combat it. There exists broader political consensus to eliminate terrorism. The public opinion is heavily tilted against Taliban and supportive of army operations. The security establishment is engaged in a resolute counter-insurgency campaign against terrorists. And the civilian government fully owns this campaign. Throughout the Musharraf era, at least during initial one year of the present government, this was not the case. The army remained reluctant in launching credible counter-insurgency operations, and whenever it did, they were limited in scope and conducted largely under external pressure. The public opinion was confused and, in fact, supportive of the Taliban cause. Political consensus to tackle terrorism lacked firmly. Musharraf regime did conduct a successful security operation at the Red Mosque, but without a clear-cut support from its political allies. Thus, by the time President Obama announced a review of the Afghan war strategy in December 2009, Pakistan’s counter-terrorism approach had already undergone a qualitative shift. On the eve of the announcement of AfPak strategy in March 2009, the country’s civilian government and security establishment were still indecisive about managing the terrorist-insurgent problem posed by TNSM in Swat and TTP in South Waziristan. By December 2009, they could claim to have achieved one major counter-insurgency victory in Swat and an increasingly impressive counter-insurgency campaign in South Waziristan.

**Promising Future?**

In terms of achievement, US and NATO troops’ eight years-long counter-insurgency campaign in Afghanistan paled in comparison with Pakistan army’s almost eight months-long military offensive in the country’s Frontier and tribal regions, by the time President Obama announced to shore up US forces in Afghanistan in December 2009. Since Pakistan’s army’s offensive against TTP and its foreign terrorist allies in South Waziristan was still not fully over, it was but natural on the part of the country’s civilian leadership and security establishment to express its concerns over the expected infiltration of Afghan insurgents across the Durand Line into the border regions in Balochistan and tribal areas. Still combating with the left-over of TNSM insurgents in Swat and fully engaged in the fight against TTP and its allies in South Waziristan, Pakistani security forces could hardly afford to simultaneously tackle other fronts that the said insurgent infiltration threatened. The “fastest possible pace” of US troops’ deployment that President Obama indicated meant that all of the major hotspots of insurgency in Afghanistan’s southern and eastern regions bordering Pakistan, including the provinces of Helmand, Kandahar, Paktia and Paktika, were to experience a heightened security campaign, especially in the spring of 2010. 30,000 additional US troops, plus several thousands of NATO troop reinforcements, was to increase the total number of foreign troops in Afghanistan up to approximately 1,50,000 from the December 2009 level of 68,000 US troops and 42 thousand troops from 42 nations under NATO command. The ripple effect of the intensified military campaign in Afghanistan’s border regions with Pakistan in the shape of insurgent infiltration and refugee influx from
Afghanistan was, indeed, a justified concern of the country’s civilian rulers and security establishment.

But, then, in the wake of worsening insurgency in Afghanistan, the United States and NATO were left with no choice but to undertake a resolute counter-insurgency campaign. Despite the reservations of its civil-military leadership, Pakistan was, therefore, left with no choice but continue to build upon its hitherto successful military missions in Swat and South Waziristan, and expand the counter-insurgency campaign to other areas of the tribal belt, particularly North Waziristan, and border regions of Balochistan, if and when the terrorist-insurgent danger surfaced there. This was because Pakistan’s inaction to fight the runaway Afghan insurgents and their local protectorates could threaten renewed pressure from the United States and its allies in Afghanistan as well as jeopardise its internal security situation. As we have seen in the preceding discussion about the major components of Obama Administration’s originally pronounced AfPak strategy and its subsequent review as well as policies grounded in them, the level of compatibility between Pakistan’s counter-terrorism interests and those of the United States and its allies in the region has significantly increased over time. The only area of friction in terms of the priorities of the two sides in tacking terrorism pertains to Pakistan’s traditional policy of showing no leniency towards those insurgents groups which commit terrorism inside the country and have soft corner for those who do not commit domestic terrorism but undertake or facilitate insurgency in Afghanistan.

Pakistan, for instance, has cut deals with two Taliban groups, one led by Mullah Nazir Ahmad in South Waziristan and another led by Hafiz Gul Bahadur in North Waziristan, both of which allegedly provide safe haven to the Afghan insurgent group of Jalaluddin Haqqani, a former Afghan Mujahideen leader, besides directly participating in Afghan insurgency. These deals have helped to isolate the TTP in South Waziristan, thereby facilitating the army’s counter-insurgency campaign there. However, for its part, the United States expects Pakistan to go after these groups as well as Afghan Taliban hiding in tribal areas and Balochistan with as much interest as it has displayed in fighting TNSM, TTP and al-Qaeda-linked Uzbek warriors. The American concerns about al-Qaeda leaders and other terrorist groups such as Lashkar-e-Taiba, Lashkar-e-Jhangvi and the country’s failure to bring them to task are aside. All of these concerns were expressed by President Obama in a letter delivered by his National Security Advisor to President Zardari when he visited Pakistan in November 2009. In the letter, the US President warned Pakistan that its use of insurgent groups to pursue policy goals “cannot continue,” while calling for “closer collaboration against all extremist groups,” including al-Qaeda, the Afghan Taliban, the Haqqani network, Lashkar-e-Taiba, and TTP. However, simultaneously, to encourage the country for action against these groups, President Obama in the same communication guaranteed Pakistan “an expanded strategic partnership,” including “an effort to help reduce tensions between Pakistan and India.”

As part of this expanded strategic partnership, proffered US carrots for Pakistan, outlined during Secretary of State Clinton’s October visit to Islamabad, center on a far more comprehensive and long-term bilateral relationship. It would feature enhanced development and trade assistance; improved intelligence collaboration and a more secure
and upgraded military equipment pipeline; more public praise and less public criticism of Pakistan; and an initiative to build greater regional cooperation among Pakistan, India and Afghanistan. One of the main reasons for Pakistani security establishment’s relative leniency towards Afghanistan or Kashmir-specific insurgent groups is the perceived fear about the United States once again doing what it did in the aftermath of the Soviet troops’ withdrawal from Afghanistan: simply leave the region after the fulfillment of its strategic interest, and letting Pakistan alone to deal with the messy consequences of the Afghan jihad. Pakistan may have contributed to the current terrorist quagmire by sponsoring or overlooking the forces of insurgency in the disputed region of Kashmir and backing the Taliban in Afghanistan prior to the events of 9/11, but its grievances regarding the US abandonment of strategic relationship with the country, are, nonetheless, justified.

However, the fact that US-Pakistan relations in future may have a radically different, positivist context is amply clear from repeated assurances by President Obama and Secretary of State Clinton that United States’ relationship with the country is long-term and strategic in orientation as well as from concrete pledges of billions of dollars of US civilian and security assistance to the country, especially under the Kerry-Lugar-Berman Act. Obviously, nothing could be said with certainty whether the US and NATO troops’ surge would make the expected difference in the insurgency-ridden ground reality of Afghanistan to pave the way for the eventual withdrawal of foreign troops. But, given the inherently evolutionary nature of the AfPak strategy, it can be argued that the targets of counter-insurgency, including the option of reconciling moderate insurgents, much faster security capacity building and enhanced civilian development in Afghanistan it has set in its original shape or reviewed form can always be modified.

In the context of US-Pakistan relations pertaining to tackling terrorism, perhaps the most important development is the grand transformation that is under way in this relationship, from the traditionally state-to-state towards people-to-people. If such a guarantee is there, then Pakistan’s civilian and military leadership can also be expected to start making no distinction between who conducts terrorism inside the country and who is involved in insurgency beyond the country’s frontiers. Already, as clear from the preceding discussion about how terrorism has evolved in recent years in Pakistan, some of the most spectacular acts of terrorism, including the October 2009 attack on the army’s General Headquarters, have been orchestrated by south Punjabi jihadi groups like Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, traditionally identified with sectarian terrorism. If the Obama Administration is willing to play a role in helping India and Pakistan resolve Kashmir amicably, then Pakistani security establishment can be expected to change its course against Kashmir-specific banned militant outfits like Jaish-e-Muhammad and Lashkar-e-Taiba.

And if Washington is guaranteeing Pakistan a strategic partnership and is willing to co-opt moderate insurgents in Afghanistan’s political and security structure, then this will surely encourage Pakistani security establishment to re-think its strategic depth strategy. Co-opting moderate insurgent, meaning Pashtun majority, amid an intensified security campaign, will be an option that cannot be exercised successfully without Pakistan’s cooperation, because of the most crucial ground reality of the Durand Line: the Pashtun ethnicity straddling across this frontier, which is a major source of current insurgent
trouble in the region, but can be a potential factor in overcoming the terrorist quagmire in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Being Afghanistan’s principal neighbour, Pakistan seeks an Afghan solution that credibly incorporates the security, political and economic grievances of its majority Pashtun population, simply because, without that, its own Pashtun population inhabiting tribal areas east of the Durand Line remains aggrieved. A military campaign that crushes terrorist-insurgents to the extent that moderate constituencies are created among the forces of insurgency—be they in Afghanistan or Pakistan—which are willing to renounce violence, dissociate their links from al-Qaeda and participate in the political process largely on the basis of the interests of the state parties does have a scope of success. However uncertain its outcome, it must be given a chance.

Notes and References

1 See the transcript of the President Obama’s speech (hereafter cited as Obama’s Speech, 27 March 2009) at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/Remarks-by-the-President-on-a-New-Strategy-for-Afghanistan-and-Pakistan/>
4 Inter-Agency Group Report, p 1.
5 Obama’s Speech, 27 March 2009.
6 Inter-Agency Group Report, p 1.
7 Obama’s Speech, 27 March 2009, op cit.
10 Obama’s Speech, 27 March 2009, op cit.
11 Civilian Deployments to Afghanistan ‘on Track’: Obama Administration,” Agence France-Presse, 6 November 2009.
12 Ibid, op cit, p 2.
13 Inter-Agency Group Report, op cit.
16 Inter-Agency Group Report, op cit.
17 The aim of Operation Khanjar was to retake the initiative in Helmand, and make it safer for elections due next month. The US-led operation was preceded and complemented by a British airborne assault north of Lashkar Gah, the provincial capital of Helmand, just over a week ago codenamed Panther’s Claw, intended to wrest control of river crossings from the Taliban and expanding the area under British control, also with the aim of preparing the ground for elections. For details, see Julian Borger, “New American tactics and resolve undergo test in Helmand,” The Guardian, 2 July 2009.
19 Inter-Agency Group Report, p 3.


Latest accounts of yearly and monthly casualties of US and NATO troops in the Afghan war can be accessed at <http://www.icasualties.org/OEF/index.aspx>


Barnes, op cit.

Markey, op cit, p 1.


See the full transcript of President Obama’s speech at official website of The White House <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-address-nation-way-forward-afghanistan-and-pakistan>

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Inter-Agency Group Report, p 6.


Kerry-Lugar-Berman Act, op cit.


Ibid.

“Clinton Pledges More Than 243 Million Dollars as Additional Aid for Pakistan,” ANI, 29 October 29, 2009


51 Ibid.
52 Ibid.