

Associate Paper

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South Asia: A Cold War “Quadrilateral” Redux?

Professor Sandy Gordon

FDI Associate

Key Points

- The emerging “quadrilateral” arrangement in South Asia involving China and Pakistan on the one hand, and the United States and India on the other, is unlikely to give rise to the kind of “locked in” pattern that pertained during significant periods of the Cold War. All parties will want more manoeuvrability and flexibility in relations than was possible under the rigidities of the Cold War.
- Pakistan will be constrained in unreservedly backing the Afghan Taliban, lest that alienate a China concerned about Islamic revolt in its west.
- China will want to see a stable, moderate Af-Pak region, one conducive to its own wider strategic purposes vis-à-vis energy, India, the US and the Indian Ocean.
- The US will want a negotiated arrangement that will allow it to remove the major portion of its forces from Afghanistan with dignity, while preserving the basic stability of the region.
- Although not happy with what it would see as a premature withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2012, India will not be able to ‘go it alone’ in Afghanistan.

Summary

For significant periods during the Cold War, South Asia and the Indian Ocean region were locked in the embrace of a four-power, “quadrilateral” structure. On one side were India and the former Soviet Union – New Delhi then had a “tilt” towards Moscow. For much of the period, Pakistan stood beside the US against Soviet and “leftist” influence in the region, being at one point even a member of the Central Treaty Organisation (CENTO). After the Sino-US *rapprochement* in 1972, China, Pakistan and the US found themselves ranged in broad terms against India and the former Soviet Union: the “quadrilateral” in effect

re-emerged as a “pentagon”. All of that, of course, changed with the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, which opened out the long process of *rapprochement* between India and the US.

Analysis

Towards A New “Quadrilateral” Structure?

When the US distanced itself from Pakistan after the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan in 1989, Pakistan immediately turned to its Chinese and Gulf friends for strategic and financial support. The former was a pre-existing relationship, but one that had been overshadowed by the US relationship, while the latter was assisted by creeping Wahhabism within Pakistan.

Now that the US is contemplating both its inevitable withdrawal from Afghanistan and the increasingly troubled relationship with Pakistan, Islamabad is again dusting off its China and Gulf options. Some in Pakistan, particularly in the military, also wish to reassert Islamabad’s policy of seeking strategic depth against India in Afghanistan, where New Delhi is garnering influence through its US\$1.2 billion aid programme.

So, we have the prospect of a South Asia-Indian Ocean region with the US and India drawing inevitably closer, while Pakistan reasserts and renovates its long-term strategic relationship with China and seeks strategic depth in Afghanistan through its old Taliban links. Thus, the four could form the primary relationships of a new “quadrilateral” structure, with a secondary, but still important, set of relationships between Pakistan and leading Gulf States.

But Is It That Simple?

Of course, it rarely is. Reassertion of the kind of locked-in, “quadrilateral” structure that pertained during significant periods of the Cold War would provide none of the participants with the degree of flexibility needed to manoeuvre across the difficult fault lines surrounding Afghanistan.

First, Pakistan will need to conduct its China relationship against a background of growing tension between the current governing élite (whether military or civilian) and the increasingly influential forces of extreme Islam. The tensions emanating from this dualism in the Pakistani disposition were recently on show with Chinese accusations that the Uighur insurgents-cum-terrorists who mounted a series of attacks in Xinjiang were trained in Pakistan. Although Beijing subsequently backed away from the accusation, the incident illustrates that China would take a very dim view of any Pakistani attempt to revisit its policy of re-establishing the “*Taliban forte*” version of Afghanistan.

Besides, there are very real doubts that Islamabad could again produce such an outcome in Afghanistan even if it wanted to do so. Pakhtuns constitute about 40 per cent of the Afghan population, with the balance made up of Tajiks, Hazaras, Uzbeks, Baluchs and others. Dari is spoken by 50 per cent of the population and is the *lingua franca* of the country. These non-Pakhtun groups have little incentive to be seduced or coerced into a relationship with Pakistan – on the contrary.

Pakistan's previous success in installing a Pakhtun, Taliban regime was initiated during a vicious civil war in which there were virtually no other external players. Even when the US departs Afghanistan, circumstances this time round are likely to be less conducive to the installation of an outright pro-Pakistan regime in Afghanistan. There will be a stronger Iranian presence and the likely continuation of US, Western and Indian influence, at least over the short-to-medium term. Even more importantly, the government in Islamabad would be aware that a fully "Talibanised" Afghanistan would likely produce "blow-back" into Pakistan and the consequent "Talibanisation" of that country also.

So, Pakistan's best option may be to insert itself into the peace process as a key interlocutor in bringing the Taliban to the table, a strategy it is already to an extent following. But this means that it will need to continue to support stability in Afghanistan and will consequently be restrained in the way it chooses to support the Taliban.

India also faces challenges in the unfolding scenario. For New Delhi, the very worst outcome would be "Talibanisation" of the entire Af-Pak region. To avoid this, New Delhi may also have to back a compromise, which would involve a voice for Pakistan and the Taliban in any negotiations. The alternative – a total lock-out of Pakistan and the Taliban – would risk prolonged war, an eventual catastrophic collapse and may not, in any case, be acceptable to the Americans, who are clearly seeking a way out.

Added to this, India simply does not have the resources or strategic reach to "go it alone" in Afghanistan. Moreover, any policy that would lead to the alienation of Islamabad could involve the shutting down of the crucial land and aerial links across Pakistan into Afghanistan. Although Washington maintains the bluff that this would not be a significant strategic setback, it most certainly would.

Conclusion: Same Bottle Different Wine

While the broad shape of a "quadrilateral" is re-emerging (albeit with the players differently arranged), we are unlikely to return fully to the kind of "locked-in" scenario that froze South Asia and the Indian Ocean region for so many years during the Cold War. All members of the new quadrilateral will want to maintain greater flexibility than that, each for their own reason.

China will want to avoid a fully "Talibanised" Af-Pak region and is therefore likely to seek to restrain Pakistan from outright support for the Afghan Taliban. India cannot "go it alone" in Afghanistan. It will ultimately have to support US and Western strategies in Afghanistan and ensure that Pakistan is not pushed too far and consequently destabilised. Pakistan will be restrained in fully following its previous strategy of backing the Taliban against all others, since it could trigger the "Talibanisation" of Pakistan, would be resisted by China and would be unlikely to succeed, at least in the short-to-medium term.

The US, while having expressed a clear, long-term strategic commitment to India, ultimately also requires a "judicious compromise" in Afghanistan so it can leave with dignity and preserve some broader stability in South/South West Asia, which in turn closely affects Gulf stability and provides a bulwark against Iran.

All this, of course, assumes that the present disposition in Pakistan, in which the current military-political élite retains its tentative hold against the Pakistani Taliban and other extremist Islamist forces, remains in place. While greatly to be desired, this is by no means certain.

About the author: *Professor Sandy Gordon is a visiting fellow at the College of Asia and the Pacific, Australian National University, a specialist of South Asia and the Indian Ocean and co-editor of South Asia Masala.*

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Published by Future Directions International Pty Ltd.
Desborough House, Suite 2, 1161 Hay Street, West Perth WA 6005 Australia.
Tel: +61 8 9486 1046 Fax: +61 8 9486 4000
E-mail: lluke@futuredirections.org.au Web: www.futuredirections.org.au