



South Asian Weekly Watch

NEWSLETTER

January 7, 2015

Afghanistan

January 7: US not to abandon Afghanistan, says White House

The White House has assured Afghanistan that the United States and its allies would continue to invest in political and economic success of the Afghan people but did not respond to a request for extending US military presence in the country.

In an interview to a US television network on Sunday, Afghan President Ashraf Ghani urged the US administration to consider re-examining its timetable for withdrawing its troops from Afghanistan.

But at a White House news briefing, Press Secretary Josh Earnest said the United States had a very clear strategy about the deployment of its troops in Afghanistan. “After the end of the year, we are now in a situation where the combat mission in Afghanistan for US military personnel has ended,” he said. “The Afghans are now solely responsible for the security of their country.”

[DAWN](#)

January 6: Afghan Insecurity

President Ghani signed an agreement with Washington for 12,000 soldiers, overwhelmingly Americans, to remain in Afghanistan in 2015 to conduct counterterrorism operations and to advise, train, and assist local forces who are fighting hard against the Taliban. But as Afghanistan begins an uncertain new era of coalition governance and self-defense against Taliban insurgents, long delays in forming a cabinet and filling most top posts in the three month old administration have left public agencies in disarray and Afghans wondering who is in charge. Violence is increasing, and insurgents are making gains in outlying regions.

In late October, the Afghan Defense Ministry said that 2014 had already become the deadliest year for

Afghan forces since the 2001 US-led invasion, with a rising number of civilian deaths and injuries. As foreign troops withdraw, Kabul's reach into the provinces has weakened, and it will struggle to maintain army rosters at current levels without billions of extra donor dollars. Afghanistan is not ready to see the US go, and it is now openly admitting it too.

Afghanistan has higher standards of living today than when it was under the Taliban regime, even when it is plagued by constant economic and political collapse. Today, millions of girls attend schools, several thousands are attending institutions of higher education, the government is more vibrant and civil society more active. The survival of this new post-Taliban setup is crucial. But with growing insecurity, corruption, US/NATO military withdrawal and other priorities around the world; the Afghan economy has lost momentum and the growth rate stands at 1.5%. Meanwhile, the number of Taliban attacks suggests that insurgents will continue to test their strength against that of the Afghan army.

[Nation](#)

January 5: Afghan president says US might want to 're-examine' pullout deadline

Afghan President Ashraf Ghani said in an interview broadcast on Sunday that the United States might want to "re-examine" the timetable for removing the remaining US-led coalition troops in the country by the end of 2016.

"Deadlines concentrate the mind. But deadlines should not be dogmas," Ghani told the CBS program "60 Minutes" when asked about the issue.

"If both parties, or, in this case, multiple partners, have done their best to achieve the objectives and progress is very real, then there should be willingness to re-examine a deadline," added Ghani, who was elected last year. Asked if he had told that to US President Barack Obama, Ghani said: "President Obama knows me. We don't need to - to tell each other."

[DAWN](#)

January 3: Sustaining Afghanistan

After a decade of near double-digit growth, the Afghan economy has stalled in the last two years. The disputed presidential election and the end of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation's (NATO) combat mission, which formally closed on Sunday has caused a slump in the economy. There is a noticeable trend of a flight of capital. As the withdrawal got nearer, investors in Afghanistan moved their money abroad. Research also suggests that unemployment and a weak economy were the biggest concerns for the people of Afghanistan, even more so than insecurity and corruption. The bulk of US aid to Afghanistan has gone into combat operations, not into infrastructure or economic development. This has been a whopping \$104 billion.

The Kabul government is expecting income this year of around \$1.8 billion dollars — less than even the value of Afghanistan's opium crop, which feeds the coffers of the Taliban. This is a sad fact that Afghanistan has to face; that its economy is surviving on black.

A collapse of the opium industry, if it is tackled so that the smuggling and production of drugs is halted, spells economic disaster as well as an angry backlash from the Taliban. This compounded by the problem that without the \$8 billion a year in international aid currently guaranteed until at least 2016, the Afghan government is unable to pay the salaries of the 350,000 soldiers and police on the front line of battling the Taliban. The withdrawal leaves the economy in tatters. This is why Afghanistan is so eager for Indian help in sustaining trade.

[Nation](#)

January 3: Afghanistan faces economic timebomb as Nato war ends

The Taliban insurgency may still be raging but the poor state of the economy could pose a bigger threat to Afghanistan's long-term viability, and huge mineral reserves are unlikely to offer a quick fix.

In Kabul's Sarayee Shahzada market, money-changers wave thick bundles of Afghanis, dollars, rupees and dirhams, but the customers are not packing the alleyways like they used to and business is well down on two years ago.

After a decade of near double-digit growth, the Afghan economy has stalled in the last two years, hit by a disputed presidential election and the end of North Atlantic Treaty Organisation's (Nato) combat mission, which formally closed on Sunday. Now the tricky political and security transitions are joined by an equally tough economic hurdle. The fact is not lost on the money-changers who deal in "hawala" transactions, an informal system of transferring funds internationally seen as a barometer of economic confidence.

[DAWN](#)

January 2: Ashraf Ghani says Afghan forces now in charge

President Ashraf Ghani called on Afghanistan's army and police on Thursday, to defend the country from the Taliban, hours after 20 wedding guests were killed by a mortar bomb fired during fighting between Afghan forces and insurgents.

The New Year marked the end of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation's (Nato) combat operations and the start of its follow-up "training and support" mission. About 17,000 foreign soldiers, most of them from the US, will still be deployed in Afghanistan.

Ghani, who made no mention of the wedding deaths, said Afghan forces were now solely responsible for security, as the country struggles with a worsening insurgency. “I would like to congratulate the Afghan nation that today our security forces have become successful in defending sovereignty and taking full security responsibility,” Ghani said.

[DAWN](#)

India

January 7: India’s dangerous belligerence by Talat Masood

Ceasefire violations by Indian security forces on the Line of Control (LoC) and the Working Boundary in the last few months have resulted in more than 30 deaths and injuries, mostly to innocent children and women. India has been accusing Pakistan of instigating similar violations and loss of life. It is a tragic irony that the same Modi government that stood with Pakistan at its deepest hour of grief, with schools all over India observing a [two-minute silence](#) to mourn the death of Peshawar schoolchildren, should be so oblivious to death of innocent children in the cross-border firing.

One should then assume that these were fleeting gestures by Narendra Modi. The understanding and cooperation needed to fight terrorism seems to be regrettably missing. India is on a highly aggressive trajectory pursuing a policy of bullying Pakistan whenever and wherever it can. The [brazen shooting of two of our soldiers](#) when they were proceeding for a flag meeting on the LoC violated rules of engagement and all international and bilateral norms. India’s foreign minister rejected Sartaj Aziz’s demand that appropriate action be taken against those responsible for the incident.

India could have a genuine grievance about the release of [Zakiur Rehman Lakhvi](#) on bail and the inordinate delay in the finalisation of his case. Unfortunately, this is how sluggish the legal system in South Asia is. Pakistan has a similar complaint with India as the accused of the Samjhauta Express tragedy have been released on bail and the court case has lingered on for years. Instead of both countries cooperating and taking measures to bring terrorists to justice, they are caught in their rivalry. Indian attitudes towards Pakistan cannot be based on the Mumbai incident forever.

[Express Tribune](#)

January 7: Love thy neighbour?

The year 2015 has not begun well for Pakistan and India. There has been rising tension between the two nations since skirmishes on the border dividing the two halves of the disputed territory of Jammu and Kashmir in late December [killed at least two Pakistan Rangers personnel](#). Since then, a series of cross-border firing incidents have taken place, with both sides claiming casualties.

In the latest episode, which took place on January 5, [four Pakistani civilians were killed along the Sialkot](#)

[border](#), as a result of firing by the Indian Border Security Force. Displacements are also taking place along the boundary. The incidents along the sector have been rising since the summer of 2014, coinciding with the coming to power of the BJP government led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi in India. The latest set of incidents takes the problem to a new pitch, and makes it harder to resolve.

Most disturbing of all is the fact that hawks on both sides of the border, most notably in India, have latched on to the current situation and are making every effort to egg politicians on. There had always been fears of a deterioration in Pakistan-India ties after Mr Modi assumed power. With hardliners extremely active, it appears this prediction is coming true, and nothing could be worse for Pakistan-India relations.

[Express Tribune](#)

January 6: Pakistan rejects India's 'preposterous' terror boat allegations

Pakistan on Tuesday strongly rejected Indian allegations of the so-called “terror boat” and termed reports alleging that the Pakistani boat was on [a terror mission](#) "baseless and preposterous".

"Pakistan is opposed to terrorism in all forms and manifestation and has been the biggest victim of terrorism," Foreign Office (FO) spokesperson Tasneem Aslam said in a statement.

"The people and government of Pakistan are determined to eradicate this menace from our territory," Aslam added.

A suspected Pakistani boat claimed by India's ruling Bharatiya Janata Party to be on a terror mission exploded in the Arabian Sea on New Year's eve following a chase, but the [Indian Express](#) reported on Friday that the vessel seemed to be on a routine smuggling trip when it was intercepted. Aslam today also rejected comments of the spokesperson of Indian External Affairs.

[DAWN](#)

January 6: US concerned over rising Pak-India tension

The United States on Monday expressed concern over rising Pakistan-India tensions and the exchange of fire along the working boundary, which has claimed four Pakistani civilian lives.

State Department spokesperson Jen Psaki said Washington encourages Islamabad and New Delhi to engage in a dialogue. "We certainly remain concerned and watch over tensions along the border. We encourage dialogue between the (two) countries," Psaki said, when the issue of flare-up in border tensions between Pakistan and India was raised at the daily briefing.

When her attention was drawn to the reports of four Pakistanis deaths in Indian fire in Sialkot sectors, the spokesperson said she did not have any confirmation but added the U.S. would obviously sympathize

with families on loss of any lives. “Our hearts will go out to the families” for any lives lost.

[The News](#)

January 4: India wants to engage Pakistan in ‘low-intensity war’: Asif

Defence Minister Khawaja Mohammad Asif has said that India wants to engage Pakistan in a “low-intensity war”, expressing confidence that Pakistan is capable of replying to any aggression.

“It seems that India does not understand the language of love and peace,” the defence minister told reporters outside the Parliament House after conclusion of the National Assembly session on Saturday.

Mr Asif said the premier had expressed the desire for having peace with India and all other neighbouring countries with sincerity, but India had not reciprocated Islamabad’s goodwill gesture. “India wants to keep us busy in a low-intensity war or low-intensity engagement on our eastern border. They are pursuing the same tactics of keeping our forces busy on all fronts and the anti-Pakistan mentality of the Indian leadership is now fully exposed,” he added.

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January 2: Pak-India skirmish

VIOLENCE along the Working Boundary between Pakistan and the India-held portion of Kashmir has been a regular feature for much of the past year. Sadly, New Year’s Eve was to be no exception. In typically murky circumstances, with both sides trading accusations and offering contradictory accounts, several Pakistani, and at least one Indian, border guards were killed — the only certainty being that both sides did fire on the other.

What is alarming about the latest, however, is that the Pakistani version suggests that two Rangers were lured into a flag meeting with their Indian counterparts and then killed in a hail of gunfire. If true, it would be an astonishing breach of the rules of engagement and would surely make managing the peace in an already fraught environment infinitely more difficult.

Also worrying is the Indian defence apparatus’s seeming determination to resort to the use of disproportionate force and then boast about its disproportionate response. When responses are measured in multiple killed for every dead body, something is surely terribly amiss. Consider also that Jan 1 is supposed to be a day when a spirit of pragmatic cooperation prevails between India and Pakistan.

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January 2: Same Old Story

After a brief respite Pakistan and India return to their favourite pastime: cross-border skirmishes. Throughout Wednesday and Thursday heavy gunfire was exchanged on various points in Punjab and the Jammu district. As always both sides blame the other for unprovoked initiation, to which they were merely retaliating. The pattern has become all too familiar, yet despite repeated occurrences, no one is closer to the truth about these ‘unprovoked attacks. Although this incident is a little different, instead of using the general umbrella of ‘unprovoked attack’ to describe the event, the Pakistani officials have presented a detailed story.

Rather than picking at official incident reports, we should focus on the stance taken by both sides after such incidents. Throughout 2014, which saw cross border violation increase to 2003 levels, India has taken a more aggressive stance, one that directs its soldiers to respond with “double the force”, and borders on open warmongering. Pakistan on the other hand has responded with condemnation, summoning embassy official, and lodging protests in international forums. This dovetails with the domestic politics of both nations. Pakistan has been struggling with a spate of anti-state protests and battling an insurgency, it gains very little from demonising India when its enemies are Muslim extremists at home. India on the other hand is helmed by a resurgent Bharatiya Janta Party (BJP) which has openly used anti-Pakistan rhetoric to ride into office.

Cross border violations, through which one can display their dead and use nationalistic machismo, therefore favours India much more than it favours Pakistan. Perhaps this fact can guide our analysis.

[Nation](#)

January 1: Pakistan, India exchange lists of nuclear installations, prisoners

Despite border tensions, Pakistan and India have exchanged lists of their respective nuclear installations and facilities in order to prevent attacks on each other’s atomic facilities.

According to the foreign ministry statement issued Thursday, the governments of Pakistan and India are required to exchange lists of their respective nuclear installations and facilities in accordance with Article-II of the Agreement on Prohibition of Attacks against Nuclear Installations and Facilities between Pakistan and India as of 31 December 1988.

The lists are exchanged on the first day of each new year. “In accordance with aforesaid agreement a list of requisite facilities in Pakistan was officially handed over to a representative of the Indian High Commission at the Foreign Office today at 1030 hrs (PST),” said the statement. The Indian side also handed over its list to the Pakistan High Commission by the Ministry of External Affairs in New Delhi at 1100 (IST).

[Express Tribune](#)

January 1: No flag meeting with India at lower level: Punjab Rangers

The Punjab Rangers, after martyrdom of two personnel in Shakargarh area by Indian Border Security Force (BSF) unprovoked firing, has announced not to hold flag meeting with India at lower official level, Geo News reported.

The spokesman for Punjab Rangers said talks between Pakistan's paramilitary force and BSF will be held only at higher official level in future, adding that India after ceasefire violations at working boundary also started bloodshed at flag meeting.

The Rangers expressed vow to respond hard if India violated international laws at the working boundary.

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