

# Prospects of ‘Grand Bargain’ Post-Mumbai and the Evolving US Policies

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## Introduction

Mumbai terror attacks were engineered from Pakistan at a time when the democratic government had become more aggressive in asserting its legitimate role in the affairs of the state. Attempting to wrest control of the infamous Pakistan’s Inter Service Intelligence Agency (ISI) from the military was one such act that ended in failure. Pakistan military could not let go of an institution which it has used for decades as an instrument of its internal and external policies arising out of a vision where democratic governments and politicians are considered a threat to security and accommodation with India is an anathema. Further, scenario in Federally Administered Tribal Area (FATA) and adjoining areas of North West Frontier Province (NWFP) where Pakistan military has been fighting an unpopular ‘now off and then on’ war had been instrumental in creating increased dissonance internally within the Army as well as with the United States on its policies of drone attacks. An additional factor of timing was the forthcoming transition of power in the US and apprehensions of the policies of incoming Obama administration with regard to Pakistan and Afghanistan.

A critical assessment needs to be made as to whether situation arising out of Mumbai attacks was visualised to be a win-win situation for military-jihadi combine that has for years steered the destiny of Pakistan, detrimental to its polity and civil society. One of the intended or unintended consequences of Mumbai attacks was validation of the domineering influence of Pakistan military in affairs of the state and undermining the authority of duly elected democratic government. While the ruling civil dispensation in the immediate aftermath of the Mumbai massacre had agreed to dispatch the Director General ISI to address the concerns of India the military pressurised the Government to dilute or withdraw its commitment. Further, continuous flip-flops of the civil government on the identity and nationality of the lone terrorist caught in Mumbai, sacking of their National Security Adviser and whipping up of war hysteria amongst many other such events provided supporting evidence of arm twisting of the civilian government by the military establishment.

Second intended or unintended consequence of the attacks was putting to rest all the hopes of a grand reconciliation between India and Pakistan in the near term. Before the attacks, some progress had been made by renewal of the Indo-Pakistan peace process that had been stalled since March 2007 due to instability in Pakistan caused by the then president Musharraf’s policies and civil society’s agitation against military rule. Post February 2008 elections in Pakistan, there had been indications that Indian Prime Minister would have visited Pakistan once sufficient momentum in Indo-Pakistan peace process had been gained. Scenario as obtaining prior to 26/11, was not unlike pre-Kargil situation, when the then Prime Ministers of Pakistan and India were negotiating for peace while military-jihadi combine was preparing to embark on warpath against India.

Third possible goal was that the post-Mumbai war hysteria created by Pakistan military would have enabled it to withdraw from its Western front in FATA and NWFP and deploy forces against India. This was to be and is being used as a bargaining tool against perceived negative policies of the US vis a vis Pakistan. In the event, Pakistani Taliban groups like the one headed by Baitulla Mehsud and many other terrorist groups like Lakshar-e-Toiba volunteered to fight along Pakistani military in case of war against India. That Pakistani military establishment continues to harbour an indulgent attitude towards such groups is clearly visible from the ISI chief, Major General Shuja Pasha’s interview to German magazine Der Spiegel in the wake of Mumbai attacks. “Shouldn’t they be allowed to think and say what they please? They believe that jihad is their obligation. Isn’t that freedom of opinion? He asked, defending extremist rabble-rousers, who are sending more and more Koran school students to Afghanistan to fight in the war there.” Such groups have been used as valuable assets and force multipliers by Pakistani military to realise their policy objectives in Afghanistan and India. ISI stands accused of supporting terrorism in Afghanistan and India. Attack on Indian embassy last year was attributed to machinations of ISI even by the US and Afghan intelligence agencies.

Withdrawal of embattled Pakistani forces from their Western front would have also relieved the pressure on Taliban and other groups thus enabling them to recoup their strength and assist Afghanistan Taliban in the coming battle of spring this year. Enduring feature of the complex jigsaw puzzle that Pakistan presents is that both military and jihadis use each other to enhance their strength and pursue their own agenda. But with jihadis becoming increasingly autonomous, it is not clear as to who is driving whose agenda. For instance, Pakistani army has ceded control of vast swathes of territory in FATA as also in places like Swat in NWFP which enables these groups to enhance their strength and widen their agenda. On the other hand Pakistan army uses them to advance its own agenda in Afghanistan and India. Further, to influence the US policies, first Pakistan’s military establishment creates enhanced threat to the US forces in Afghanistan by aiding and abetting Taliban, and thereafter to mitigate that threat it bargains for vast amounts of military aid which it uses in different direction. Unwittingly, through its soft approach towards a recalcitrant Pakistani military the US has become complicit in an unending cameo where it ends up furthering the agenda of jihadis and Taliban fraternity.

With the appointment of Richard Holbrooke as Obama’s special representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan the US administration has resisted the temptation of formally linking solution of Afghanistan with the solution of Kashmir but that does not mean that there has been a fundamental change in its perceptions. Holbrooke in his speech after the appointment avowed to follow an agenda which would hardly remain confined to Pakistan-

Afghanistan matrix. "In Pakistan, the situation is infinitely complex. In putting Afghanistan and Pakistan together under one envoy, we should underscore that we fully respect the fact that Pakistan has its own history, its own traditions, and it is far more than the turbulent, dangerous tribal areas on its western border. And we will respect that as we seek to follow suggestions that have been made by all three of the men and women standing behind me (President Obama, Vice-President Joe Biden and Ms Clinton) in the last few years on having a more comprehensive policy." 1 In post-9/11 era the then President Musharraf was forced to reverse his policies in Afghanistan at the pain of risking being 'bombed to Stone Age'. Musharraf had then decided on a tactical retreat to protect its strategic assets (nuclear deterrence) and policies in Kashmir. In the current strategic milieu, Pakistani generals have calculated that the US is no more in a position to issue such dire threats and that the US needs Pakistan military more than they need the US; howsoever wrong they may be in their assumptions. Even now at a time when Pakistan's economic and financial situation is precarious, the USA has more than sufficient leverages to influence Pakistan's negative policies.

Yet, as if the earlier American experience of giving aid to Pakistan was not a lesson enough, John Kerry, who is also the Chairman of Senate's Foreign Relations Committee and is in a position to pilot an aid package has recommended (through an Atlantic Council Study Report) an aid of US \$ 4 to 5 billion over and above the earlier proposals of US \$ 1.5 billion per year for the next decade. This aid would be in addition to the IMF and loans from other sources. \$1 billion has been earmarked for military besides the military component of \$1.5 billion of the earlier proposals. Recent audits by the US administration have detailed how billions of dollars have been misused and even fraudulently claimed by the Pakistan military. Throwing good money after bad to recover the investment, generally is a trait associated with high-risk takers or in short, gamblers.

Over reliance of the US on Pakistan's military to bail it out of Afghan quagmire has given shape to the US policies that have yielded hardly any positive results in the past seven years of turmoil in Afghanistan. Formulation of a regional approach to the Afghan conflict has been suggested by the same very experts and advisers of Obama administration who have sought to link Pakistan-Afghanistan and Kashmir in one simple solvable equation. But not enough efforts have been devoted to concretise a regional approach. There are many grand bargains and reconciliations waiting to happen in the region before the situation in Afghanistan can be stabilised. What about a bargain with Iran? How about a bargain with Russia and Central Asian countries to remove the vice-like grip of the Pakistani GHQ on the US policies. Alternative routes for logistics for the US and NATO forces can only be realised, and dependence on Pakistan reduced in a meaningful way, if such bargains are made.

Repeated attacks on NATO convoys passing through the territory of Pakistan, in effect, are a strategic communication of military-jihadi combine to the US on the limits of its powers and capacities. The US is not ready to adopt a regional approach as yet. It has resisted the attempts of France and Germany to involve the United Nations Security Council alongwith other nations in the region to resolve the Afghan conflict. The US strategy of 'surge and bribe' or a version of the British colonial policy of 'Divide and Rule' following a success in Iraq of similar strategy is unlikely to yield any result in the coming years, unless the core issue of reigning in Pakistani generals is addressed. Harsh reality of the matter is that solution of Afghanistan is located in Pakistan; that too in Pakistani military establishment. And any strategy not focused on this would not do. Propping up military and Pakistani state repeatedly, asking India to grant concessions to Pakistan on Kashmir, seeking to preserve balance in South Asia through massive military supplies to Pakistan, and asking India to exercise restraint every time a state sponsored terror attack takes place would only whet the appetite of Pakistani military junta for more of the same.

The "Grand Bargain" as propounded by Professor Barnett and Rashid Ahmed is meant to rescue the situation in Afghanistan by re-establishing the relations of the key South Asian stakeholders on the basis of cooperation and enlightened self-interest with the US as an honest broker.<sup>2</sup> It has very ambitious aims of bringing stability in Afghanistan by linking Afghanistan, Pakistan and Kashmir together and then curing defects through a distorted vision of the underlying nature of the problem. As amply outlined in the discussion carried out above, such a formulation is likely to flounder against vastly varying perceptions of the stakeholders and especially against the ossified thought processes and ideology of Pakistan's military establishment. The Grand Bargain is also an adjunct of the US 'Greater Central Asia Strategy' with a strategic calculus carrying negative connotations for Russia and others. Would there be some flexibility shown by the new administration in its approach to Central Asia? Too early to say but it can be safely predicted that a shift in the evolving US policies would become imperative before the end of first term of Obama's presidency.

At another level the US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's inaugural visit to China focused on 'deepening' and 'broadening' Sino-US relationship, with emphasis on cooperation in dealing with global financial crisis, climate change, and energy and security issues. The visit has been viewed by the Chinese leadership as a tilt towards Beijing. Over a decade back in the immediate aftermath of India's nuclear explosions the then US President Bill Clinton had offered 'overlordship' of South Asia to China in dealing with the two nascent nuclear countries. Emboldened by a perceptible shift in the new US administration's policies, China has also embarked on pushing its agenda in South Asia. People's Daily, China's official mouthpiece, has advised Richard Holbrooke to go back to his original mandate of linking Afghanistan, Pakistan and India in one simple equation. According to Chinese wisdom, the Afghan problem, the Pakistani problem and the Indian-Pakistani problem are all related. Of course, Pakistan who has China as its all weather friend would have certainly been gladdened by such a formulation.

Indian political leadership is perceptibly disappointed with the US policies more so in post-Mumbai attacks scenario. While India has been expecting the US to apply more pressure on Pakistan to deliver on culprits of Mumbai massacre, Pakistani generals have been remonstrating before the US to give it an 'equal treatment' vis a vis India' and apply more pressure on India to relent on Kashmir. The US interests remain focused on Durand line while Pakistan exploits the vulnerabilities of the US in Afghanistan, unabashedly by threatening to withdraw troops from western front. One thing that stands out clearly is that complex dynamics of the region do not lend itself to a quick solution through simple formulations. And the evolving Indo-US relationship has its limitations.

Neither, it can be used by the US to tread on the toes of India nor, can it be used by India to define the nature of the problem according to its own very justifiable vision. Therefore, one stark lesson emerging out of Mumbai is that India has to temper its expectations of the US and follow a balanced and more nuanced foreign policy which in the recent years seems to have become more attached with the US world view.

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Journal of the United Service Institution of India, Vol. CXXXIX, No. 575, January-March 2009.