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THE BONN CONFERENCE: Pakistan - the "Spectre at the Feast"

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The non-appearance of Pakistani representatives at the December 5 2011 Bonn Conference on Afghanistan is an attempt by Pakistan to send a clear message that "enough is enough", and that the country will not tolerate being messed around with any further. Or so its ruling government would have the world think. In reality, Pakistan has probably cut off its nose to spite its face. By not appearing in Bonn, the country has lost a valuable opportunity to state its case to the world, reaffirm its stance in support of the (continued) war on terror post-Bin Laden, and - importantly for its own foreign policy and security preoccupations - to counterbalance India's growing influence and presence in Afghanistan.

Lack of trust between the main protagonists - Afghanistan, Pakistan and the US - is clearly a critical issue. What is evident, though, is that the stakes are too high, and there is too much to lose, by indulging what could be seen as a petulant gesture. Afghanistan is too important for the security of both Pakistan and the region as a whole, for one of the key players to be absent from an event discussing how to resolve the continued conflict, ten years on from Bonn 1.

Much has been made in the international press of late about Islamabad's "double game" on the war on terror. However, whilst global opinion has come firmly down on the side of viewing Pakistan as a spoiler in the region, there appears to be a real lack of recognition of the impact domestically of the depth of the dislike - indeed, hatred - of the US' policy in the region.

The drone attacks may appear to the West simply as incurring "inevitable" collateral damage inflicted mostly in Northern Waziristan, a region that is perceived abroad as "the wild, wild East", portrayed a barren rocky terrain with no law and order and few - though gun-toting - inhabitants. In Pakistan, the attacks are seen as a violation of sovereign territory, almost as an act of war (for killing civilians), and as impugning Pakistan's ability to run its own country.

The current wisdom of the Pakistani street has it that if only the drone attacks stopped, and the US left Afghanistan, all would be well in terms of domestic and economic policy in Pakistan and the country would prosper. With the announcement of the eventual US troop withdrawal from Afghanistan and the

new development of the tragic NATO attack in early December 2011, substitute "NATO" for the "US", though the mantra remains the same. The average Pakistani views the Afghanistan situation as an American war which has brought Pakistan nothing but destruction and death. (Indeed, Pakistan has lost more soldiers fighting Islamist extremism than NATO has). True, placing the blame on external scapegoats is an easy way out for Pakistan's rulers to explain to their constituents the successive multiple failures to deliver development, energy supplies, economic benefits, functioning services, good governance and access to the rule of law, though the combination of the two sets of factors may also lead to yet another military coup in Islamabad.

Pakistan's position on Afghanistan is that it sees itself as a major stakeholder, and as one that has suffered greatly in consequence of its support for the Western allies. It has faced multiple internal problems for years, as a result: a massive influx of Afghan refugees, many of whom are still in Pakistan, bringing huge economic and social problems; loss of life, infrastructure and foreign investment (due to security fears); an exponential increase in kidnappings; heightened insecurity within the country, including spates of suicide bombings; and the rise of extremist militant groups known collectively as "the Pakistani Taliban".

Pakistan routinely comes under fire for not doing more on the war on terror, despite what it sees as its many sacrifices in pursuit of that aim. In this regard, it does itself no favours, however, by its apparent continued support for banned militant groups like the Laskar e Janghvi, (implicated in the Ashura massacre of Shi'as in Afghanistan in the first week of December). The December 5 Bonn conference being intended to address the causes of ongoing violence in Afghanistan, and how to resolve them, given the upcoming international troop withdrawals, it would have been an ideal opportunity for Pakistan to explain its position on Afghanistan. However, its place at the table remained empty, though the spectre of its absence loomed large. This is a pity, because a positive outcome on the war on terror is not possible without cooperation between Pakistan and Afghanistan, and, indeed, between Pakistan and the US.

Pakistan shares 2,500 km of an open boundary with Afghanistan (seen as vital to its security strategy against India, as well as being a difficult neighbour). It therefore wants a role in determining who sits in government in Kabul. The international community seems to agree that talks with the Taliban are now necessary to end the war. Pakistan, with its ties to the Taliban and other allied militant groups, is an essential partner in these negotiations. Pakistan's non-participation at Bonn was a signal that unless it gets its way, it will act as a spoiler in Afghanistan. It certainly has the capacity to do so. However, Pakistan's boycott was poor tactics, confirming the international community's worst fears.

Some would argue that part of the reason for the tragedy of 9/11 was the failure of international intelligence agencies to listen to and to keep talking to, elements whose opinions they did not like, whose politics they disagreed with, and whose actions they abhorred. If this is true, the importance of America actually listening to Pakistan's concerns, rather than just throwing money at the problem through pouring in massive amounts of development aid and attempts post-hoc reconciliatory diplomacy when things go wrong, is absolutely critical – for Pakistan, for Afghanistan, for the region, and for global security. The US failure to listen is a major error. Whatever the modality of the relationship, there will be no orderly exit from Afghanistan without Pakistan. And Pakistan is arguably far more important to US (and European) interests than Afghanistan has ever been.