

Pakistan Looks to Karzai

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Afghan premier Hamid Karzai is the key to good relations between Islamabad and Kabul.

After spending two decades manipulating Afghan politics from behind the scenes, Pakistan now has to jostle for influence along with other countries in the region.

And since Islamabad backed the toppled Taleban regime for the last five years, it is going to have to use the utmost diplomacy to curry favour with the alliance of forces which helped overthrow the student militia.

Many members of the new interim Afghan government, particularly its Northern Alliance members, are hostile towards the country which fuelled the repressive Taleban regime. They would much rather encourage India, which supported them throughout their struggle, as a regional partner.

A greater Indian role is, of course, anathema to Pakistan. Though Islamabad is powerless to affect that process, it will nonetheless strive to retain some sort of influence in the newly unified country.

And the best way Pakistan has of doing that is through the newly appointed prime minister Hamid Karzai who is the key to their nurturing any sort of relations with the new administration.

Karzai himself has many close connections with Pakistan. He lived there for a number of years, speaks fluent Urdu and has close ties with Pakistani Pashtun leaders.

Islamabad is likely to use the latter to bolster relations with Kabul. Pakistani Pashtuns have already showed willing. "Pakistan should establish working relations with Karzai and other Pashtun chiefs along its border with Afghanistan," said a prominent Pashtun leader Ahmed Khan Sherpao, formerly chief minister of the North-West Frontier Province.

There is a good history of cooperation between Karzai and the Pakistani Pashtuns and the prime minister is already a widely respected figure among this community. "He is a pragmatic and flexible Pashtun leader Pakistan can deal with," said Sherpao.

Another Pakistani Pashtun who may help build bridges between the two countries is Mehmood Khan Achakzai. President of the Pakhtoon Milli Awami party, he helped Karzai win support with Pashtun tribes over the border, which contributed much to his candidacy for the premiership.

All are aware that Pakistan must treat the new administration with kid gloves and avoid repeating mistakes of the past. As such, Achakzai recognises that Islamabad should not be seen as interfering in the country's affairs again.

But having the Pashtun connection does not mean that fostering new relations will be plain sailing. There are a number of important obstacles which need getting around.

The biggest problem is the Northern Alliance's hostility towards Pakistan. This was plainly illustrated by remarks made by the new Afghan interior minister Younis Qanouni when he visited India last week. Pakistan, he said, had destroyed his country.

India has supported and financed the Northern Alliance since its inception and it can hardly come as a surprise that a trusted bond has grown between the two. Karzai, who was educated in India, is also sympathetic to forging close ties with India.

Another problem is that Karzai's father, Abdul Ahad, was shot in Quetta in 1995 and it is widely suspected that Pakistan's intelligence services were behind the assassination. Karzai senior had been engaged in mobilising Pashtun tribes against the Taleban in south-eastern Afghanistan just as the student militia were emerging as the dominant force in the region.

Despite these hitches, Pakistan can at least take comfort from the fact that Kabul needs its southern neighbour from both a strategic and an economic point of view. Afghanistan, as a landlocked country, is dependent on both Islamabad and Tehran for its supply routes to eastern and western markets.

It is also in Karzai's interest to nurture relations with Iran and Pakistan to counter the influence of the Northern Alliance's supporters: Russia, India and the CIS states.

A lasting peace here will only be established if a balance can be struck between the conflicting interests of the various parties and countries who have been involved in Afghanistan over the past few years.

The next six months will be a trial period not only for the new administration but also for its neighbours.

Foreign powers are being welcomed to pitch in, says Achakzai, but they should take care to steer away from meddling in Afghan affairs. "Lasting peace in Afghanistan will be possible only if Afghans are given the chance to decide their own fate."

Shiraz Paracha is South and Central Asia editor for a London-based news service. Between 1987-1998, he reported from Peshawar on Afghanistan, North West Frontier Province and the Tribal Areas of Pakistan.

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