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The Nation

## Afghan strategy: Pakistan and Iran on the same page

By Ashraf Javed

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As the US has begun phased troops' withdrawal from Afghanistan, the countries bordering the war-torn state are increasingly concerned on the blow back. The two major countries that share borders with Afghanistan are Pakistan and Iran.

Pakistan believes that peace in Afghanistan is vital for the stability of the entire region and as such follows the policy of non-interference in Afghanistan's internal affairs. The President of Pakistan has taken a whirlwind visit to Iran (twice in three weeks), Afghanistan and Saudi Arabia, an effective contributor to Afghan stability.

Pakistan with its century-old cross border family and cultural bonds and continues to confront serious spill over effects of American war on terror in Afghanistan. Iran with its 936-Km shared border with Afghanistan has close linguistic and cultural ties particularly with Tajiks, Persian speaking Afghans in Heart Province and Hazara.

Tehran also has deep relationship with the Shias in central and northern Afghanistan. As such, Iranian influence in this region runs deep. Despite the differences over Kabul's future both Pakistan and Iran have vowed to work in tandem towards harmony in Afghanistan. Iran has proved to be staunch supporter of Pakistan in adversity.

With another apparent US ditching of Pakistan after being usurped for its war in Afghanistan, Islamabad seeks fresh regional alignments to ease its dependence on Washington.

An official of Pakistan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs put the President's second visit to Iran within three months as part of Islamabad's "continuous consultations, coordination and cooperation" with states that contribute towards peace and stability in Afghanistan. He also underlined, "Pakistan attaches special significance to joining efforts of immediate neighbours in an endeavour to bring peace to Afghanistan and to reversing the tide of terrorism afflicting the region." The two Presidents met twice to discuss issues on the same day with focus on Afghanistan, Middle East, bilateral trade and energy. The two sides also reportedly agreed on adopting a regional approach to meet the challenge of militancy and terrorism.

The regional diplomacy to face the brunt of the fall out and work out measures to safeguard respective national interests with regard to post US withdrawal is in full swing.

Former Russian states bordering Afghanistan like Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are politically weak and suffer from ethnic violence that is often exacerbated by Taliban's unbridled terror activities from across Afghanistan. Foreseeing the economic and political spiraling down in these two particular countries in the aftermath of US withdrawal, Russia is in consultation with Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan for placement of Russian troops in sensitive areas in their territories to ensure their respective stability for it ultimately affects the Russian security as well. Russia and Pakistan overtime have come closer on Afghan issues that affect their security and bilateral relationship and Russia has publicly acknowledged Pakistan's centrality to Afghan stability.

Pakistan has always considered Iran as an indispensable friend and an important regional player. The convergence of interests in the back drop of US withdrawal was evident when both the Presidents combined called on Iran's Supreme leader Ayatollah Khamenei. The Iranian Supreme leader termed Pakistanis as, "a great nation with long and deep background of struggle; a nation which believes in Islam" whose progress and success pleases Iran. President Zardari reciprocated the sentiments by emulating Iran as a model of resistance and path to progress. The convergence of interests has brought the two nations closer as the end game in Afghanistan approaching fast.

The surging strategic ties between the two countries are reminiscent of bonhomie for common good.

Both the countries have pledged an Afghan-led peace process free of any outside preferential dictates on choosing certain factions of Taliban who do not figure as game changers. Both are also concerned on American designs in post US withdrawal scenario as Washington seeks to place some 25,000 American troops on five strategic bases of choice in the name of fighting terrorists and stabilisation of Afghanistan.

One wonders Taliban who inherently rejected foreign presence in their homeland, would react to permanent placement of American troops in Afghanistan more brazenly and aggressively.