

Afghan-Pakistan border initiative leaves more questions than answers

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Embassy Magazine
Published July 7, 2010

High in the mountainous terrain that runs along the Afghan-Pakistan border, in what US President Barack Obama calls the "world's most dangerous place," sit two cities, Jalalabad and Peshawar. Between them, winding across the treacherous border, stretches a road that has become one of NATO's most crucial re-supply lines for its war in Afghanistan.

Over the last few years, that stretch has been the site of continued violence between militant and Taliban forces, NATO troops, and Afghan and Pakistani officials, all fighting for control of the region and its inhabitants.

And now, if G8 members and international financial institutions follow through with a newly hatched plan, it will also be the site of a shiny new highway and railroad.

Last month, at the conclusion of the G8 summit in Muskoka, G8 leaders announced their official support for a "Peshawar-Jalalabad Expressway" and a "feasibility study for a Peshawar-Jalalabad rail link."

"We are confident that these projects and others—realized with the efforts of the Governments of Afghanistan and Pakistan—will deliver tangible benefits to the Afghan and Pakistani people and help to foster regional stability," the G8 declaration read.

The initiative is supposed to address the lack of economic opportunities in the border region, a problem long highlighted by global institutions like the World Bank, which say it contributes to unrest and insurgents' ability to recruit new fighters. The initiative is aimed at building infrastructure that could support a broader trade network and dovetail with other trade-oriented projects already launched. The expressway and rail link themselves were two priorities already identified by a joint Pakistan-Afghanistan foreign minister's statement in early March.

But the June announcement, a 75-word statement stuck 38 paragraphs down into the declaration, contained only the bare bones of an initiative. It contained no financial details, named no specific donors and did not expand on any timeline for implementation. It also did not directly explain how the project would address the broader issue of border security.

As a result, it has at least one of the affected countries calling for more substance.

"We thought there would be more clarity in terms of the funding but unfortunately there isn't," said Pakistan High Commissioner Akbar Zeb.

"You should identify where the money is coming from, and on what terms would that money be available."

Meanwhile, Afghanistan's ambassador to Canada, Jawed Ludin, said he "appreciated Canada's leadership" on the initiative, saying that Canada used its G8 presidency "to highlight the importance of infrastructure development in that part of the world, which is not just important from an economic point of view, but for regional and global security."

But he also highlighted how infrastructure remains a pivotal problem in Afghanistan.

The perilous stretch of road in question is an example of that chronic lack of infrastructure, said David Carment, fellow at the Canadian Defence and Foreign Affairs Institute. He travelled it decades ago before the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. He said even then the road was dangerous in design.

Now, he says, it will take a significant, prolonged and comprehensive investment to overcome both local militants that may target the construction of the expressway and rail link, as well as the overall precarious nature of the landscape.

The Harper government has made the Afghanistan-Pakistan border one of its central foreign policy tenets. It boasts that it has poured around \$32-million into training, infrastructure and equipment for border security as well as programs to increase the "dialogue" between the two countries.

It also facilitated what has become known as the Dubai Process, a meeting between senior officials from both countries over border security, law enforcement and counter narcotics. And just a week before the G8 declaration, Canada paid roughly \$3-million to establish a new border police faculty at a Kabul police academy.

As a result, some critics are now wondering why Canada, as the host country, champion of a prosperous Afghanistan-Pakistan border region and financier of such efforts, was not able to convince the G8 to provide more details on the initiative.

"It's great everyone is behind the idea of border security between the two countries, but you have to say 'is that all there is?'" said NDP foreign affairs critic Paul Dewar.

"I think most people recognize that now, that there needs to be a more comprehensive approach than just looking at the dimension of the border."

Bloc Québécois defence critic Claude Bachand agreed, suggesting that while he found it difficult to criticize the initiative itself, he will be looking to the government to provide more details about the funding.

The government says its focus has been on projects that can be implemented to show early success, and so it picked the two initiatives highlighted by the Afghanistan-Pakistan meeting in March.

While not addressing concerns over lack of details, a departmental spokesperson in an email did say that Foreign Affairs Minister Lawrence Cannon considers the June declaration to be a success. The department also cautioned, however, that the G8 will continue to need the support of the governments of both countries for the projects to continue, a possible hint that the ball is now in their court.

"Without the partnership of Pakistan and Afghanistan, nothing is possible. Other countries, no matter how much money they invest, cannot solve these challenges without the support and engagement of the countries involved," the spokesperson wrote.

The G8 said it plans to go to international financial institutions such as the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank for financing, as well as to individual G8 members. The plan is to first wait for the feasibility study to get underway, and then go back the institutions and countries to come up with the funding.

But what proportion of funding each donor will take on, any actual dollar figures, or the timing of the feasibility study are as yet unanswered questions, said Mr. Zeb.

He said he remained confident that the initiative would come through because the G8 has been quite "keen" on it since it originated. But he said he awaits details on all of these issues, since "there is certainly a question mark there."

Officials from both Afghanistan and Pakistan had been involved in discussions during the G8 consultation process that raised the possibility of launching other projects, but these were not mentioned in the G8 declaration. Instead, the group intends to proceed in stages, tackling one or two projects at a time.

It is unclear whether Canada's support for the initiative means that the government is placing renewed focus on the Pakistan side of things, and if so, to what degree. As of late, it has been cryptic on its policy toward the South Asian nation. For example, in February, Canadian International Development Agency president Margaret Biggs said "on some days we go back and forth" on whether Pakistan is a country of focus for the aid agency. The government has repeatedly said over the past year that it is reviewing its Pakistan policy, but nothing concrete has emerged.

In any case, the evidence is there that border security is what the region needs most. Last week, the Taliban claimed responsibility for an attack on the NATO air base in Jalalabad, injuring two service personnel. Last month, the Taliban also said it had captured dozens of Pakistani troops after attacking border checkpoints.

The northern half of Pakistan also continues to be a hot spot. Suicide bombers killed 42 people last week and injured 175 at a shrine in Lahore. It followed a similar incident in May where gunmen killed 82 people. The Pakistan government now wants to convene a national conference on terrorism.

Roland Paris, associate professor of public and international affairs at the University of Ottawa, pointed out that the G8 had now formally acknowledged some aspects of the Dubai Process, which he called a "useful way of moving the Afghanistan-Pakistan co-operation forward on the practical matter of joint co-operation on the border," but he said it was too early to declare whether that was a notable step.

Over 100 NATO troops, four of those Canadian, were killed last month in Afghanistan, making it the deadliest month for the coalition since the war began.