

CRITICAL QUESTIONS

The Trilateral Summit: Prospects for U.S., Afghan, and Pakistan Cooperation

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Today, Afghan president Hamid Karzai and his Pakistani counterpart, Asif Ali Zardari, arrive in Washington, D.C., for a two-day summit with U.S. president Barack Obama that focuses on the security situation in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

The summit had originally been intended to be the second trilateral meeting to be held at the foreign ministerial level. In a sign of how seriously the White House is viewing developments in the region, however, the meeting was promoted to the presidential level. President Obama will first meet with Karzai and Zardari separately before participating in a series of joint conversations.

The summit is taking place against the backdrop of the U.S. surge and upcoming elections in Afghanistan and a deteriorating security situation in Pakistan. Indeed, on the day the delegations landed in Washington, the Pakistani military ordered all civilians in the Swat District to leave the area, a signal that a major new Pakistani military offensive is about to begin against the Taliban.

The three questions surrounding the summit are: What does the U.S. government want? What do the Pakistan and Afghan governments want? And what will be the outcome?

Q1: What does the U.S. government want?

A1: The United States would like to build support for its developing strategy in the region, strengthen international resolve, improve the negative security/public safety trend in both countries, and increase public awareness and support in America. Afghanistan and Pakistan are in crises, and this will be President Obama's first chance to develop his own personal perspective.

In response to these dual crises, U.S. officials will hope to establish a shared narrative for the coming year. Adopting a regional approach is a key element of the administration's strategy. From this working design, President Obama will aim for better coordination in a united fight against al Qaeda and the Taliban in the region.

The next year and a half are critical for the allied forces to improve security in Afghanistan, with a number of key partner nations scheduled to leave in that time and the planned expansion of the Afghan National Army. Growing instability in different parts of Pakistan could produce further internal surprises and a spillover effect on NATO forces.

Q2: What do Afghanistan and Pakistan want?

A2: The Afghan delegation would like to see a restoration of public safety and broader benefits from international assistance. They will focus on continued concerns over cross-border sanctuaries in Pakistan, assistance delivery, and the impact of the troop surge.

Pakistan is in need of substantial fiscal support, counterinsurgency training, and social and political reform—all at a time when President Zardari's base of support is eroding. If the discussions move to military equipment, proposed conditions, and accountability measures, that will be a sign that minutiae has overtaken strategy.

Q3: What will be the outcome?

A3: Recent exchanges among the U.S., Afghan, and Pakistan leaderships have been characterized by frustration and finger pointing. The deteriorating situation in Pakistan and steady decline in Afghanistan, however, have created urgency for all parties, leaving an opening for closer cooperation. At present, the three presidents share more common ground than at any time in the recent past.

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Although there should not be an expectation of any large tangible breakthroughs, perhaps some of the friction will be taken out of the respective relationships. This seemingly modest achievement will be significant as it resets the trilateral relationship on a different and more fruitful trajectory in the direction of true partnerships.

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