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Future of Afghanistan Post-2014 and Implications for India *

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Dealing with the situation unfolding in Afghanistan and its ramifications present a formidable challenge for India. India has a substantial stake in the stability of Afghanistan. Besides the historical relationship between the two countries, Afghanistan has considerable bearing on India's security and economic interests. An unstable Afghanistan raises the possibility of a greater threat of terrorism, spread of radical ideology and an unstable Pakistan. India's access to energy-rich regions of west and central Asia can become much easier with a stable Afghanistan acting as a 'land bridge'.

The unfolding situation in Afghanistan can be examined by focussing on three key challenges facing the country—political, economic and security.

Political Challenge

The political challenge essentially has four dimensions—the nature of the State, the 2014 elections, the role of President Hamid Karzai and the reconciliation process involving the insurgent group, the Taliban. The Afghan state has rarely been defined by a cohesive, federal structure of governance. It has mostly been a highly centralised state, ruled from Kabul with the provinces and outlying areas controlled by the agents of the state or those who enjoyed its patronage. Mullahs and Maliks controlled most of the provinces long before they were replaced by warlords and other beneficiaries of state patronage. Attempts to change the character of the state have had little success. Amanullah Khan (reign: 1919-1929), who won the final rounds of the battle with the British and became the first Pashtun ruler of the newly independent country, was also the first of the Pashtun rulers to experiment

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with state building along modern lines. His successors, Mohammad Nadir Shah (1929-1933) and Mohammad Zahir Shah (1933-1973) extended the state building process by creating a framework of modern Afghanistan—a Constitution (promulgated in 1964), a government in which the ethnic minorities participated, and active promotion of women's emancipation. But none of them attempted to extend a direct rule over the country from Kabul. All the rulers remained content with pursuing a goal of limited state control, allowing other stakeholders to supplement the pursuit of administering the country through patronage and force, quite similar to the present arrangement in Afghanistan ruled otherwise by an elected government. This historical reality should have a sobering effect on the present debate about pushing the agenda of political reforms, including giving functional autonomy to provinces. These ideas are noble in intent but are premature at this stage of Afghanistan's tenuous experiments with functional democracy.

Corruption and inefficiency, unfortunately, have been the hallmark of the elected governments in Afghanistan. There is little faith in the Karzai government and even lesser in the future government. Scepticism about the electoral process is widespread and not entirely misplaced. The previous elections were marred by fraud and violence. It is therefore fair to say that relatively transparent and fair elections in April 2014 will have a deep influence on the polity. Legitimacy of the electoral process can be brought about by putting in place a transparent institutional mechanism to conduct the elections as well as to ensure an effective and trustworthy oversight and adjudication process. The international community, including India, can play an important role in ensuring a fair and transparent electoral process. Much depends on President Hamid Karzai. He retains considerable power and influence in Kabul and other provinces where key officials are his appointees. Karzai is an influential Pashtun leader and enjoys the confidence and loyalty of a large number of Pashtun leaders who have benefited from his patronage since 2004. Karzai retains the power to ensure that the 2014 transition is fair and transparent. His recent statement about not contesting the elections has stemmed the widespread rumour that he might engineer a situation to ensure continuing as the President. However, till date, he has not made a clear statement about his own stand on the elections. The possibility of Karzai fielding a candidate of his choice and ensuring his victory remains high.

The reconciliation talks with the Taliban is another grey area. There are a whole lot of questions which beg a cogent response before examining the issuing of talking to the Taliban. For instance, who is the Taliban? Who is talking to whom? What are they talking about? Even if the talks do come to a positive conclusion, what will be the mechanism to implement the agreement? The dialogue with the Taliban has been an ongoing process. There are reports of negotiations as early as 2005. Meetings have taken place at different places, from Maldives to Paris. The Taliban has been allowed to open an office in Qatar to facilitate talks. Despite such intensive engagement, reconciliation efforts seem to be at best sputtering. The scepticism about the talks has only grown wide and deep in recent times.

The Taliban's attitude towards the April 2014 elections is not positive. There is no possibility of the Taliban taking part in the elections. It is an exclusionary player and has consistently opposed taking part in any form of electoral process under the 2004 Constitution which it claims is inspired from the

'infidel' West. It is, therefore, more than likely that the Taliban will try to discredit and disrupt the elections. The violence and fear of violence could, therefore, be higher than during the previous elections. The reconciliation process is going nowhere.

Another issue which is an intrinsic part of Afghan life and politics is ethnicity. More than 42 per cent of the population are Pashtuns, followed by Tajiks (27 per cent), Hazaras (9 per cent), Uzbeks (4 per cent) and others. In other words, while Pashtuns form the biggest ethnic bloc, non-Pashtuns are overall in majority. The Pashtuns are also a divided community—the differences among various tribes and sub-tribes have historical roots. An additional dimension is that while Pashtuns dominate 12 provinces, Tajiks are a majority in 10, Hazaras in three, Uzbeks in three and the remaining six provinces are mixed. It is not easy to predict which way these provinces will vote. Ethnicity no doubt will play a key role, but other factors like violence can influence the outcome as well. The last round of elections saw Hazaras sweeping the Pashtun-dominated Ghazni province because a large number of Pashtun voters stayed away fearing retribution from the Taliban.

Economic Challenge

The economic challenge is no less daunting. A key instrument for violence-affected countries to make a transition to a more stable future has traditionally been economic development. In the case of Afghanistan, it is even more crucial. The recovery of the country's economy from decades of violence and disruption is slow and painful. The indicators are positive—the GDP has grown at a rate of 9.1 per cent per annum from 2003-04 to 2010-11. But nearly 40 per cent of the GDP is supported by international aid and most of it is utilised for security related activities and programmes. There is, however, a greater sense of what needs to be done in terms of bringing about an economic turnaround. Much of it, however, depends solely on international aid and assistance. Big ticket energy and mineral projects are expected to give boost to the economy in the near future. Countries like India and China have won some of the key lucrative contracts and are expected to put in the much-needed investment. But these investments, if and when it happen, will have long gestation periods. The World Bank has estimated that the earliest Afghanistan can come around economically is 2025. It is apparent that Afghanistan, for the next decade at least, will remain largely dependent on international aid and assistance to stabilise its economy.

Security Challenge

The third challenge, perhaps the most significant, relates to security. This is also the most complicated issue, being hostage to too many variables. For a better understanding of the issue, it will be useful to examine it under four sub-themes—1) The Taliban, 2) Afghan National Security Force (ANSF), 3) the US presence and 4) Pakistan.

The Taliban has been in existence since the early 1990s. Most of the Taliban leaders were part of the 'Afghan Jihad' movement against the Soviet occupational forces in Afghanistan. With the help of

Pakistan, a united Taliban emerged in the wake of the civil war in Afghanistan and took control of Kabul and most parts of the country by 1996. The group ruled the country till October 2001 when the US carried out a military offensive against the group and Al-Qaeda in the wake of the 9/11 attacks. Most of the Taliban cadre and leadership fled to Pakistan where they were given shelter in different towns and cities—Peshawar to Karachi. The Taliban subsequently regrouped and regained strength by 2004-2005 with the help of Pakistan Army and its surrogate extremist groups like Lashkar-e-Jhangvi and Lashkar-e-Tayyeba.

When the US diverted its military focus to Iraq (March 2003), the Taliban seized the opportunity to regain control of Pashtun-dominated areas in south and east Afghanistan. As the US got enmeshed deeper in the Iraq War, the Taliban and its associates anchored themselves even more deeply in Afghanistan and Pakistan. By the time the US turned its focus on Afghanistan with a troop surge in 2010, the security situation had turned worse. The Taliban and its allies like the Haqqani Network had become formidable forces, willing and capable, with the help of Pakistan Army, to take on the some of the best militaries in the world. What has not changed is the end goal of Taliban—to throw out the 'infidel' foreign forces and establish an Islamic Emirate in Afghanistan. Over the years, the Taliban and its 'backbone', the Haqqani Network, have strengthened their combat capability as well as their influence among the Pashtuns, especially in the east and southern parts of the country. Their combat skills are reflected in the modus operandi of the attacks—from IED blasts and suicide bombings to armed assaults and infiltration of foreign forces. The Taliban has effectively deployed its “area denial capabilities” by either fully controlling or restricting access to key highways and mountain lookouts.

What has added to the complexity of the security situation is the Taliban's persistent ambiguity about the reconciliation. Although the reconciliation talks have been on for quite some time, the Taliban has refused to accept the pre-conditions of laying down arms and accepting the Afghan Constitution. There is no clarity on how the Haqqani Network and Hizb-e-Islami, two key allies of the Taliban, view the reconciliation talks. As of today, there is no visible sign of any attrition in the Taliban strength and influence. With the international forces getting ready to leave, the only other force which can deal with the threat from Taliban and its allies is the Afghan National Security Force (ANSF).

Afghan National Security Force

In terms of numbers, ANSF is an impressive force. By December 2014, the combined force of Afghan National Army, Afghan National Police and Afghan National Air Force, will be 352,000. The army's strength alone will be 187,000. By June 2013, ANSF had taken over the entire responsibility of managing the security in the 34 provinces, leaving ISAF with a supporting role. These are significant achievements and do indicate the success of the project to create an indigenous security force. But this is where troubling questions come up. Will ANSF be able to maintain its cohesion and effectiveness after the departure of the international forces in 2014? The US military and its allied forces provide much of the logistical and leadership support to ANSF in carrying out its missions. Though there are commitments to continue with the training and counter-terrorism operations, the Afghan forces'

leadership will have to increasingly do with its own initiatives to deal with the insurgency and other problems post-2014.

Doubts about the ANSF as a force remain high because of two fundamental reasons—a high attrition rate and ethnic divide. The attrition rate has so far been quite high with high incidence of desertions and dismissals. In all, the force has to recruit and train at least 25 per cent of its troop level every year. The operational effectiveness of the force is hamstrung by a weak or absent support structure—medical, training, maintenance and other essential logistical requirements.

Factionalism in the force is also a cause of concern. There are fears about the force retaining its unity if challenged on military or political terms after the US drawdown. This fear stems from the ethnic composition of the force—41% Pashtuns, 34% Tajiks, 12% Hazaras, and 8% Uzbeks. This broadly follows the demographic composition of the country. The majority of the composition is occupied by the non-Pashtun bloc. In addition, the Tajiks dominate the officer cadre. These ethnic equations could become a divisive factor post-2014 in the event of a political and financial meltdown, both quite high on the list of probabilities.

There is also a past precedence. The Afghan army had splintered along the ethnic line after the Russian government stopped all aid to the Najibullah government, crippling the air force and army within days. A repeat of the security force disintegrating if and when the financial and material aid is stopped or reduced cannot be ruled out completely. In all probability, the international community, including India, will not allow such an eventuality.

US Military Presence

The question surrounding the US military drawdown is equally worrisome. It is not yet clear how many US troops will be left behind in 2015 and what will be their role. There are varying figures in public domain—beginning from 6000 to 25000. There is also a clear divide between the White House and Pentagon on the critical number. There is however a general consensus that there would be sufficient international military presence post-2014 to prevent a Taliban takeover and the collapse of the ANSF. The other issue about the US troop deployment is the nature of engagement. Officially, the US has sought a counter-terrorism and training role post-2014. It is however believed that if the US were to maintain nine military bases, it will have to maintain a far bigger presence than earlier estimated. This military presence will depend on the Bilateral Security Agreement and the Status of Forces agreement, both of which are at various stages of negotiations. Another indication about a bigger military presence is the expansion of its diplomatic footprint in Afghanistan. The Kabul embassy is being expanded; a new consulate has opened in Herat; two additional consulates are in the pipeline at Mazar-e-Sharif and Jalalabad. These consulates would mean additional security infrastructure and a larger diplomatic presence.

Pakistan's Role

There is no problem of clarity in understanding Pakistan's role in Afghanistan. Pakistan's concerns in Afghanistan are varied. It is anxious about India's expanding role in its neighbourhood. However, it is more worried about terrorism emanating from Afghanistan. Its deep existential anxiety is about the possibility of a Pashtun consolidation. More Pashtuns live in Pakistan than Afghanistan. Two million Afghans take refuge in Pakistan; Karachi is the biggest Pashtun city. Afghans continue to oppose the Durand Line dividing Pakistan from Afghanistan. Afghans in the recent past have staked claimed to a greater Afghanistan, incorporating some of the Pashtun-dominated areas in Pakistan.

Pakistan therefore wants a friendly regime in Kabul—a pro-Pakistan and an anti-India dispensation. The Taliban is perhaps arguably the friendliest of Pashtuns from Pakistan's perspective, and they are certainly anti-India. To support the Taliban, Pakistan created and supported various criminal and militant groups like Lashkar-e-Jhangvi and the Haqqani Network. These `strategic assets` are Pakistan's instruments of policy. All of these groups are against India and are capable of destabilising not only Afghanistan, but the region as well. There is no evidence that Pakistan is willing to give up this strategy of using these terrorist groups to achieve its objective in Kabul. This is clearly reflected in the Pakistan Army's refusal to contain and neutralise groups like the Haqqani Network or Lashkar-e-Tayyeba (LeT). The double jeopardy as far as India is concerned is Pakistan's increasing vulnerability to the very forces of destruction it has helped spawn in the past. An unstable Pakistan presents an even bigger problem for India.

China

China's growing interest in South Asia and its likely role in Afghanistan calls for a closer examination. Given its investments, its energy sources in Iran and Central Asia and its relationship with Pakistan, China's presence in Afghanistan in the future is inevitable. China's involvement in Nepal, Bangladesh, Maldives and Sri Lanka in the recent years is a clear indication of its growing interest and influence in India's immediate neighbourhood. China's presence in Afghanistan is driven by its concerns regarding strategic balance in the region given its alliance with Pakistan. As India grows and its ambitions grow with it, it fears that an increasing Chinese presence in Afghanistan, as in other parts of South Asia, may constrict New Delhi's strategic space. A strong Chinese presence in Afghanistan may alter the Kabul-New Delhi relationship.

Implications for India

The fallout of the US drawdown will be significant for India. The following implications are the most obvious: a) Pakistan's expanded role, b) Revival of trans-national terrorist activities, c) Spread of Salafi ideology and groups, d) Restrictions on energy security, and e) Drug trafficking.

The problem with Pakistan is its ambitious over-reach and grandiose plans of dominating Kabul without having a matching capability. Pakistan is undergoing its worst economic crisis and faces incredible security challenges from terrorist groups which it created and supported. Thus Pakistan's ability to play mischief and its vulnerability to forces of destruction could add to India's Afghanistan problem.

Terrorist groups inimical to India have gained strength in the last decade. The situation in Afghanistan and the possible domination, if not outright victory, of the Taliban and the US retreat will galvanise these groups to renew their attacks against India and its interests. With the western forces leaving Afghanistan, there is bound to be a diminishing scrutiny of terrorist activities in Pakistan. The West, in fact, is going to be more concerned about the re-emergence of Al-Qaeda in the Middle East and will refocus its attention to this region after 2014. This will allow the Pakistan Army relative freedom to launch major terrorist operations in Kashmir and other parts of India. In all likelihood, there will be a revival of the Kashmir Jihad. This will be supported and sustained by new recruits from Kashmir and LeT, with Jaish-e-Mohammed playing a supportive role in the valley.

The Taliban's continuing presence in south-east and eastern parts of Afghanistan and the alliances it has with the Haqqani Network and Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan amplify the threat of radicalism in Pakistan, and the region as a whole. The Taliban and its allies cannot only launch attacks in India or on Indian interests in the region but also spearhead the growth of Salafism in the sub-continent. A significant fallout of the Salafi expansion is evident in the sectarian bloodletting in Pakistan. The Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan will be even more dangerous than the situation in 1996-2001 primarily because of the growing presence and influence of radical groups, especially Salafi, in Pakistan.

India's energy security needs are inexorably tied to Iran and Central Asia. This is amply reflected in India's substantial investments in the region, be it the Chabahar port in Iran or the oil fields in Central Asia. India's public sector energy company, ONGC Videsh (Oil and Natural Gas Corporation), already has a 15 percent ownership stake in Kazakhstan's Alibekmola oil field and has announced a \$1.5 billion investment in the joint Russian-Kazakh Kurmangazy oil field in the Caspian Sea. The company has also acquired a 25 per cent stake in Kazakhstan's Satpayev offshore exploration block, estimated to be at a price of \$5 billion. The block has potential reserves of 1.8 million barrels, and is expected to be operational by 2020. Kazakhstan is set to become one of the world's top ten oil producers by 2025. ONGC in the last few years has bought stakes of over \$ 7 billion in some of the top oil companies in the region at (8.4 per cent stake in Conoco Phillips oilfield at \$5 billion and \$ 2.1 billion stake in Imperial Energy Co.). Progress on the proposed 2,000km Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) or Trans-Afghan gas pipeline has been impeded by surging violence in Afghanistan and in Pakistan's Balochistan.

To sum up, India has three key challenges in Afghanistan in the near future. The first is to ensure the sovereignty and integrity of Afghanistan by strengthening institutions, both civilian and military, and

by facilitating a smoother political transition. Second is to prevent militant groups and external forces, including Pakistan, from subverting the country's progress towards stability. Third is to integrate Afghanistan into the regional economic framework for a sustainable economic development.

Comments

Even if the Taliban were to return to power, it would be different in many ways. There will be no repeat of the 1990s situation when the Taliban seized control of most parts of Afghanistan with the help of the Pakistan Army. Given the fluidity of the situation, three possibilities can be envisaged- a) The return to the 1990s situation and disinterest of US, as a natural corollary. b) The non-Taliban ethnic groups like the Tajiks offer strong resistance to the Taliban. This will only ensure the continuity of the protracted internal strife within the country. c) The breakup of Afghanistan, with some parts in east and south under the Taliban control, and northern parts in the control of other non-Pashtun alliances.

A generational differentiation within the Taliban can be made on the basis of their approach towards various issues. The new generation Taliban, despite being indoctrinated in the same conservative ideology as its predecessor, is distinct from them so far as their tactical positioning on women and tolerance towards other ethnic groups are concerned. The new generation seems to have learnt a lesson from the scathing criticisms hurled at the first generation on such issues. On the question of 'spill-over effect' of Afghan Taliban insurgency, it should be borne in mind that in order to reach India, it has to chart its path through Pakistan. It is also necessary to remember that in 2014 there will be a drawdown of forces and not withdrawal. In terms of military disengagement, there is no reason to visualise an Afghanistan sans the US too soon.

Certain areas in which India and China can make common cause with each other also deserve attention. India and China, both affected by terrorism, will remain apprehensive over the terrorist fall-out from Afghanistan. China and India have economic stakes in Afghanistan. China's economic and political interests in Afghanistan are closely tied. China has more than once demonstrated that it would vehemently defend its economic interests. In Afghanistan, China has to deal with many subtle problems and cannot use its whip against Afghanistan in the name of Islamic fundamentalism like it does in case of Uighurs in Xinjiang or Arakan Muslims in Myanmar. Besides India and China, there are other stake-holders. By employing the energy resource card, the Central Asian republics may emerge as key stakeholders in association with civil organisations of Afghanistan.



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