

Afghanistan Conundrum : An Analysis and the Way Forward

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Background

Afghanistan today stands precariously perched on the edge of an abyss. A hapless victim of a once-again Taliban and al-Qaeda resurgence, an inept and deeply corrupt administration, a not-so-effective the US led international military presence, the devious role being played by its neighbour, Pakistan, and a booming drug economy makes Afghanistan a basket case of political and strategic instability. Dubbed by many security analysts as one of the most dangerous places on earth, Afghanistan, is truly the country where the world's most intense global war on terror (GWOT) is being fought, albeit not with much to cheer about.

The War in Afghanistan commenced in October 2001 with the launch of the US led Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) as a direct response to the multiple September 11, 2001 terrorist strikes in the US heartland. This operation aimed at the capture of al Qaeda supremo Osama bin Laden (OBL), destruction of al Qaeda and removal of the brutal Taliban regime (1996-2001).¹ The US has approximately 30,000 troops in OEF 2 looking after the eastern and southern parts of Afghanistan, especially along the disputed Durand Line which divides Afghanistan and Pakistan, and is home to the most militant and lawless Pashtun tribes. The other international force in Afghanistan is the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) which was established by the UN Security Council in December 2001 to secure Kabul and its surroundings. In 2003, NATO assumed control of the ISAF and has around 55,000 troops from 47 countries including around 23,000 troops³ from the USA. After successful removal of the Taliban regime during the initial phase of OEF, the USA led Coalition Forces are now bogged down in the security quagmire of Afghanistan with President Hamid Karzai's writ diminishing gradually, an alarming rise in the Taliban - al-Qaeda control over the Afghan countryside, flourishing poppy trade and above all, the dangerous situation astride the Durand Line from where rebel Pashtuns and the Taliban - al-Qaeda terrorists, especially in Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) and equally restive North Western Frontier Province (NWFP), operate with impunity against the Kabul regime.

Strategic Significance of Afghanistan

By itself, Afghanistan is a landlocked country, characterised by harsh terrain, sparse population and with hardly any resources which could precipitate any conflict of interests. However, its unique geographical location sandwiched between Central and South Asia, has always made it a much coveted strategic pivot in the 'Great Game'. In the 19th century, the first 'Great Game' was prompted by Czarist Russia's quest for the warm waters of the Indian Ocean and the creation of a buffer between Imperial Britain and Russia. Today, the stakes are significantly higher which include oil and gas, strategic metals, hydro-power, pipelines, transit routes and access to the developing markets of Central Asia. The growing geo-strategic importance of Central Asia has led to the most powerful political cum military blocs vying for strategic space and influence in this region, namely one led by the USA through the NATO and the other bloc by China and Russia through the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO).

Afghanistan's immediate neighbour, Pakistan, has always surmised that Afghanistan confers additional strategic depth to it in the event of a military confrontation with India and that an adversarial regime in Kabul could impinge on Pak security by forcing it to face two fronts. The Chinese too have looked for access to the Indian Ocean and are feverishly engaged in building the Gwadar Port on Pakistan's Makran coast. This port would also be able to serve Central Asia, albeit through Afghanistan. For India too, this country remains the economically significant transit route to energy rich Central Asia, besides being a co-partner in the fight against terror especially engineered by Pakistan. The other major regional player in this area remains Shia dominated Iran which also seeks to influence the already complex political scenario of Afghanistan and has provided shelter and support, off and on, to some of its favourite warlords.

The Karzai Government and the Afghan National Army

Hamid Karzai chief of the Popalzai tribe hails from a widely respected Pathan family and was the US favourite to take over the reins of Afghanistan after the ouster of the Taliban regime in 2001. In Afghanistan, a conclave of tribal chieftains, the Loya Jirga considered as the source of all legal authority, also legitimised Karzai as Afghanistan's President in mid 2002. Despite recalcitrant warlords spooking a nose at Kabul, an unrelenting drug mafia fuelling crime and terrorism, and Pakistan's perennial mischief to put manifold obstacles in the Kabul administration's path especially by fomenting violence through the Taliban-al Qaeda extremists, Karzai has endeavoured to put Afghanistan on the road to development and stability, though without much success.

The Afghan National Army (ANA) in the 1960's to the 90's was earlier trained and equipped by the erstwhile Soviet Forces. After the ouster of the Taliban the West commenced restructuring and equipping the ANA. It was planned to have a force level of 70,000 troops for the ANA by 2009.⁴ The strength by February 2009 is around 79,300 personnel though it is felt by many experts that the overall level must touch around 1,35,000 troops. The ANA Chief, General Bismillah Khan Mohammadi has expressed that "The National Army has developed but frankly not fast enough. We're facing terrorists, the Taliban and interference from Pakistan and we cannot yet control our own borders. The force strength of 70,000 is not going to be sufficient."⁵ The ANA comprises five

regionally based army corps, comprising 14 brigades along with a nascent air corps. In addition to the ANA, the Afghan National Police and some Ministry of Interior troops total around 50,000 policemen. The ANP does not carry a good professional reputation like the ANA and is perceived to be corrupt. In addition, currently the ANA's Air Corps woefully lacks adequate rotary lift capability. Despite limitations in terms of equipment, air power and training, the ANA has recently commenced independent operations in the hinterland. Other encouraging trends in the ANA have been the fall in desertion rates and the recruitment of women soldiers 6 including in the parachute wing. The Karzai government has been rather unsuccessful in attracting ex-Talibanis and local militias to join the ANA and ANP so far.

The Redoubtable Drug Economy

Though the Holy Koran forbids all intoxicants, it is ironical that the so-called staunch believers namely, the Taliban have been using precisely the drug trade to fuel insurgency and terrorism in Afghanistan! Ahmed Rashid, in his book 'Descent into Chaos' has succinctly summed up the incestuous relationship between drugs and terrorists by stating that "the Taliban resurgence, al-Qaeda's reorganisation, and the restarting of its training camps for international terrorist groups after the US invasion would have been impossible without the explosion in heroin production. In turn, the attempts - to rebuild state institutions, curb warlordism, and create a viable legal economy were heavily imperilled by the illicit cash generated by drug traffickers. The flood of money to tribesmen on both sides of the border led to the spread of Talibanisation. In short, one of the major reasons for the failure of nation building in Afghanistan and Pakistan was the failure to deal with the issue of drugs."⁷ Notwithstanding deliberate efforts by the UN, the Coalition Forces and numerous NGOs in curtailing the burgeoning drug economy of Afghanistan, the country still remains the world's biggest opium producer. However, the latest UN reports have been encouraging as far as opium cultivation is concerned, as a 19 per cent reduction did take place in 2008 compared to 2007 and amazingly 98 per cent of the total cultivation was confined to the seven provinces out of 34 provinces in the Country and these are the provinces which have security problems.⁸ This highlights the strong link between opium cultivation and the security situation.

Pakistan's Continuing Machinations

After the ouster of the Taliban regime in 2001, as soon as Pakistan realised that the Karzai government would be following an independent, secular policy and in conformity with the Coalition Forces to take on the Taliban-al-Qaeda combine, it resolved to remove Karzai, who has since survived many ISI conceived assassination attempts. Importantly, India's growing influence in Afghanistan has unnerved the Pakistanis who have always visualised this region as its own exclusive backyard. The ISI continues to foment terror in Afghanistan through its old and well established linkages with militant leaders like Mullah Mohd Omar, Behtullah Mehsud, the Haqqani father and son duo and warlords like Gulubddin Hekattmayar. The USA remains in a Catch-22 situation that, though in full knowledge of Pakistan's duplicity in the War on Terror, it needs them desperately, for the bulk of their logistics chain to Afghanistan runs along two routes which commence at the port of Karachi; and one thence moves along the road via Chaman-Kandhar and the second one across the Khyber Pass route. In addition, bulk of the oil required for the Afghanistan operations gets refined in Pakistan itself prior to its move forward. Frequent raids on the US supply convoys have been launched lately by the Taliban-which could be with connivance of the Pak Army. Any 'surge' which US contemplates can only take place if logistics are ensured as supply by air hardly fulfills the requirements.

The current cease-fire between the Pak government and the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (led by Mullah Fazullah and his father-in-law Sufi Mohd) in Swat Valley where the Pak government have agreed to impose the old Sharia law in return for the Taliban's promise to halt all insurgent activities will have to be carefully monitored as it will have an effect on government - extremists relations in Afghanistan also. To most analysts this step is a 'surrender' to the militants, though some feel that this step could be replicated to broker peace in the other troubled areas of both Pakistan and Afghanistan.

Obama and a Fresh US Approach

Immediately on taking over the US Presidency, Barack Obama signalled his priority for Afghanistan over Iraq by nominating the veteran diplomat, Richard Holbrooke, as the Special Envoy for the Afghanistan-Pakistan region besides ordering a 'surge' of 17000 additional troops to Afghanistan. President Obama has expressed that "Pakistan and Afghanistan are central in the war on terror".⁹ He also stated that the situation remained "perilous" in Afghanistan and that his envoy would lead "our effort to forge and implement a sustainable approach to this critical region."¹⁰ Meanwhile a dismal picture of spiralling violence and a disintegrating society in Afghanistan has been reported in a confidential NATO report prepared by the Pentagon on behalf of the ISAF. Also, casualties figures for both Afghan civilians and those of the US and NATO forces were the highest in 2008 since 2001 according to both the Pentagon and UN reports.¹¹ The latter found 2118 civilians being killed and in the same report, UN secretary General Ban Ki-Moon stated, "despite the enhanced capabilities of both the Afghan National Army and the international forces, the security situation has deteriorated markedly."

The February 2009 Munich Conference debated at length the ongoing Afghan conundrum. Holbrooke told the conference, "NATO's future is on the line here - its going to be much tougher than Iraq."¹² The US Central Command Chief, General David Petraeus warned of a "downward spiral of security"¹³ and in addition to more troops, he called for "a surge in civilian capacity" to help rebuild villages, train local police, tackle corruption in the Afghan Government and reduce the country's thriving opium trade. At this conference, the Germans had come out strongly for redoubling of development works in Afghanistan. Rebutting the charges including his 'softness' towards some drug peddling warlords, Hamid Karzai told the attendees that Afghanistan had made large strides in development since 2001 and opined that the only way to bring stability to Afghanistan was to eventually negotiate a deal with the Taliban. Meanwhile, the White House has planned a review of their options in

Afghanistan and is likely to unveil its new strategy in April 2009 at the NATO Summit in France. President Obama in his first address to the Joint Session of the Congress on 24 Feb 2009 reiterated his firm resolve to root out terrorism from the Afghanistan - Pakistan region by evolving a new strategy.¹⁴

India's Role and Options

India has had age-old civilisational, political and economic ties with Afghanistan and cordial relations with all governments in Kabul except with the Taliban. Since long, India has been assisting the Afghan government in various developmental projects. In recent years, the UPA government has pledged over \$1.2 billion (Rs 6000 crore) for development works in Afghanistan. Only in January 2009, the strategic 215 km road Zaranj-Delaram in south western Afghanistan which connects Kabul along the Garland Highway to Iran was opened despite many attempts by the ISI and Taliban to disrupt its construction. This important road opens up a doorway for trade with Central Asia through Iran and its port of Chabahar. In addition, India is completing a second major infrastructure project that is the Pul-e-Khumri to Kabul transmission line and the sub station at Chimtala in Northern Afghanistan is being completed shortly. Besides, Indian assistance in various educational, telecommunications, medical and agricultural projects is well underway. India also trains ANA and ANP personnel on a regular basis. In addition, faced with a common threat emanating from the Taliban-al Qaeda and ISI combine, intelligence sharing between the two countries is only natural.

As India enlarges its strategic footprint in Afghanistan, Pakistan is rather wary of the growing Indian influence, whilst some in the US establishment may expect to see India also taking on a direct military role to augment the ISAF. Nevertheless, it will be prudent for India to keep away from direct military involvement in Afghanistan, even if requested by Kabul. However, India can augment training of Afghan military and police personnel, and also consider selling/donating combat equipment like T-72/55 tanks, BMP-2s, small arms including mortars, light artillery, radio, night vision and mine clearing equipment, helicopters and light aircraft, and non-lethal equipment like B vehicles, winter clothing etc. Nevertheless, India will have to despatch additional para-military personnel, suitably equipped, to deal with local insurgents and protect Indian assets to thwart the ISI-Taliban machinations against it.

The Way Forward

For the world to win its first GWOT and bring a modicum of stability to this terror ravaged region, a well concerted regional approach rather than a unilateral US-centric one is essential. Having ordered just 17000 troops to Afghanistan, perhaps only to temporarily stabilise the operational situation, President Obama has bought time as he has ordered a comprehensive review of the USA's Afghan strategy. According to media reports, the same will be presented to his NATO allies in France in April 2009. Meanwhile, commenting on the 'surge' so ordered, Admiral Mike Mullen, Chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff has cautioned, "It isn't going to make a difference after those troops get here, if we haven't made progress on the development side and the government side."¹⁵ The Atlantic Council, a Washington based think tank has opined that Afghanistan's future would be determined by progress or failure in the civil sector" and had also advocated a regional approach and regional solutions.¹⁶ As the USA looks for a new strategy, some suggestions are enumerated in the succeeding paragraph.

Firstly, the US led NATO strategists should call in all regional players who are affected by the adverse security situation as prevailing currently, namely India, Pakistan, importantly Iran and members of the SCO namely, Russia and China as also the Central Asian States to evolve a regional strategy to combat terrorism and fundamentalism. In case, any country fails to cooperate with the larger goal of peace in Afghanistan and the rooting out of terrorism, concerted combined action including sanctions by the world community could be contemplated. Secondly, notwithstanding any problems, the Afghan parliamentary elections slated in August 2009 which will also elect the next President must be held on schedule for democracy is the panacea for many ills. Thirdly, efforts must continually be made to involve as many Afghans and their institutions in development work, and the aspect of self-governance be encouraged. The UN must coordinate all reconstruction and drug elimination efforts. Fourthly, no peace can ever come to Afghanistan until the semi- autonomous "badlands" of Pakistan are kept in check and terrorists of many hues ensconced there are marginalised. Aid to Pakistan should be directly linked to results which Pakistan shows in the GWOT. Pakistan's sincerity to combat terror is the key to peace in Afghanistan. The world has to bear in mind that the rapid Talibanisation of Pakistan has taken terror elements in that country a step closer to Pakistan's nuclear arsenal and the world has now got endangered as never before. The USA may wish to do something about it, for it's worth remembering that suicide bombers are not expected to use any logic!

Conclusion

The world community must not fail in Afghanistan as stakes are too high for the civilised world in this region. India must play a proactive role in bringing peace and development to this terror afflicted country and use its influence to get friendly countries like Iran and Russia on board with the international community to stabilise the worsening situation in this region. The US will have to impress upon Pakistan, using all the levers it has, that their moment of reckoning is around the corner and the battle against terror is more in the interest of the integrity of Pakistan than that of the USA.

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