

Dutch Withdrawal from Afghanistan: Explaining Domestic Constraints of Foreign Policy

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Introduction

When Dutch forces deployed in Afghanistan as a part of International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) commenced their withdrawal on 1 August 2010, it was termed as the beginning of a new phase by some people. The decision to recall the troops from Afghanistan was taken by the Dutch government in February this year and the Netherlands became the first North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) country to pull combat troops out of Afghanistan. By the end of this year, from a contingent of nearly 2000, Netherlands will have only 60 non-combatant military personnel in Afghanistan, placed at Kabul and Kandahar. Dutch, who had both combat and non-combat missions in the Uruzgan province of Southern Afghanistan, will be replaced by Australian forces. The withdrawal comes at a time when President Obama had sanctioned the American surge in Afghanistan and also requested the NATO countries to respond positively to his plan. Despite the US surge, President Obama too has on several occasions expressed the desire of early pull out of forces from Afghanistan. In this regard it is also important to highlight the statement of Afghan President Hamid Karzai on foreign forces during the 2010 Kabul Conference. President Karzai in his address said, "I remain determined that our Afghan National Security Forces will be responsible for all military and law enforcement operations throughout the country by 2014".¹

Situation in Afghanistan

Will, the situation in Afghanistan take a new turn in the next couple of years with the government at Kabul getting the control of security and subsequently ISAF ceasing its operations? Interestingly, it's not an unplanned move and there are larger dimensions to it. This can better be understood in light of the fact that the nation's foreign policy is influenced by domestic politics and other actors. International relations scholar Robert D Putnam, in his article Diplomacy and Domestic Politics: The Logic of Two Level Games, explains this complex linkage of domestic politics and international relations. According to Putnam, "Domestic politics and international relations are often somehow entangled.....it is fruitless to debate whether domestic politics really determines international relations or the reverse. The answer to the questions is clearly, Both sometimes".²

A closer analysis of American and ISAF operations in Afghanistan from 2001 shows the apparent link between domestic and international politics. It is evident and can distinctly be divided into two phases. The first phase begins after the terrorist attacks of 9/11 and continued till 2006. The second phase is more recent, starting from 2007 and coincides with the emergence of Mr Barack Obama in the American politics. Terrorist attacks on the sole superpower simultaneously shook the American public and the government and there was nationwide unanimity that the epicentre of terrorism (Afghanistan) should be attacked to dismantle al-Qaida and its terror networks and to capture the main conspirator of 9/11, Osama bin Laden—dead or alive. American President George W Bush, asked his coalition partners to help the USA in what was termed as 'War against Terrorism'. In a joint press conference with French President Jacques Chirac in first week of November 2001, Bush categorically mentioned that, "A coalition partner must do more than just express sympathy, a coalition partner must perform. Some nations don't want to contribute troops and

we understand that. Other nations can contribute intelligence-sharing, but all nations, if they want to fight terror, must do something".³

The USA - ISAF Operations

During the first phase America got unqualified support from its European allies who contributed to NATO forces. In retaliation prominent European cities were attacked by al-Qaida and its associate organisations. Major lethal attacks on civilians in Europe include, 1995 Paris Metro bombing, the 2004 bombing of commuter train in Madrid, and the July 2005 London bombings. The mindless violence inflicted by terrorists generated sizeable public support both in Europe and in the USA for the military operations in Afghanistan and to an extent in Iraq. When the propaganda of Saddam Hussain possessing the Weapon of Mass Destruction (WMD) was floated by George Bush and Tony Blair in 2002-03, it was considered with seriousness by the people gripped with a fear of insecurity. Contrary to these claims, during the course of the Iraq war, revelations of fabricated logic and fraudulent proofs for military operations against Baghdad badly harmed the image of President Bush. This was also the time when casualties of the American and ISAF soldiers had risen in Afghanistan. According to the website: icasualties.org (which keeps the records of fatalities in war) till 2007, coalition forces in Afghanistan had lost 752 of its personnel – of which 475 were Americans, i.e. almost 64 per cent of the total (for more details see table 1).

Table 1 : Coalition Military Fatalities by Years in Afghanistan (2001-09)

Year	USA	UK	Other	Total
2001	12	0	0	12
2002	49	3	17	69
2003	48	0	9	57
2004	52	1	7	60
2005	99	1	31	131
2006	98	39	54	191
2007	117	42	73	232
2008	155	51	89	295
2009	317	108	96	521

Source : icasualties.org [Online: web] Accessed on 13 August 2010, URL : <http://icasualties.org/oef/>

It is also a notable fact that with the passage of time the number of fatalities of Americans and ISAF forces have gone up further. In the year 2004, the number of deaths for the American forces was 52, which crossed double digits in 2007 and went upto 117. The steady flow of coffins both from the war-wrecked Afghanistan and Iraq was the biggest blow for the Bush Doctrine.

Consequences of Dutch Withdrawal

The second phase (2007 onwards), began with a crash in the ratings of President George Bush. Amongst many of the issues which attributed to Mr Obama's popularity, was his opposition of Bush Doctrine. Dialogue, reconciliation and resolution were the new mantra for the White House, and the neo - conservative vocabulary was rendered obsolete. This was even reflected in the official statement of the Norwegian Nobel Committee while declaring the 2009 Nobel Peace Prize for Mr Obama. As per the press release, "The Norwegian Nobel Committee has decided that the Nobel Peace Prize for 2009 is to be awarded to President Barack Obama for his extraordinary efforts to strengthen international diplomacy and

cooperation between people.”⁴ In brief, a change in domestic politics led to the change in the USA’s foreign policy approach, the same applies to Netherlands. The Dutch withdrawal from Afghanistan was finalised in February 2010, after Labour Party rejected the appeal of Prime Minister Balkende for honouring NATO’s request for extension of withdrawal dates. Dutch Prime Minister Balkende failed to persuade his largest coalition partner, the Labour Party which resigned from government, forcing the PM to accept its position. If the Dutch departure proliferates, it can start a chain reaction because Canada’s commitment to ISAF will end this year, Poland’s in 2012, and for the United Kingdom it is 2014-15.

The American Initiatives

Popular demand for exiting Afghanistan cannot be overlooked for long by the NATO countries. America is also well aware of the situation and White House is busy in chalking out a plan for resolving the Afghan problem without compromising its national interest. The much propagated Af-Pak policy is a step in the direction of resolving the Afghan problem. In a quest for a permanent solution, America is even willing to open secret channels of dialogue with factions of insurgents in Afghanistan. The projection of ‘Good Taliban’ and ‘Bad Taliban’ by the Pakistani Army and ISI is precisely to facilitate negotiations between the Americans and certain terrorist groups with Pakistan being given the central role. It is an open truth that Afghan President had a discussion with Sirajudin Haqqani, leader of a militant group affiliated with al-Qaida. The talks were arranged by the ISI and it goes without saying that this clandestine parley had American consent.

Future Scenario in Afghanistan

The American administration is keen for a settlement in Afghanistan both in the short and long term. In the interim period, power sharing arrangement between the different warring groups is the main aim. However, in the long run America will surely try to ensure political and economic stability in Afghanistan by supporting development policies. In this it is worth noting that the US Secretary of State, Ms Hillary Clinton, during her visit to Pakistan before the Kabul Conference in July this year, pressurised Islamabad to sign Afghanistan Pakistan Transit Trade Agreement (APTTA)⁵. Under APTTA, goods laden trucks can travel from Afghanistan upto Wagah border from where they can easily come to the Indian market. Although assessing the APTTA’s impact on the future of India-Afghanistan relations is a different topic, it shows the US concern for improving Afghan economy to facilitate its early withdrawal from the Af-Pak embroglio. To this end it is applying multiple measures to get Afghanistan on its own feet. That is why strengthening Afghanistan is a part of the US counter-insurgency operations. What the USA requires before starting withdrawal from Afghanistan, is a guarantee from major players in Kabul that anti-American activities will be restricted so as to avoid another 9/11 type catastrophe. There are speculations about the American withdrawal however it will be naïve to think that America will completely pull out from Afghanistan. After construction of fortified bases in Afghanistan, considerable number of its army personnel would remain in and around Kabul to influence the functioning of Afghan government. May be, installing a puppet regime in Kabul and a tacit understating with Pakistan is what the America is aiming in determining the future of Afghanistan.

Conclusion

To conclude, it is true that Dutch departure is just the beginning of a new phase in Afghanistan. It can be understood in the theoretical framework of linkages between domestic and international politics, as suggested by international relations scholar Robert D Putnam. The logical corollary of the argument is that before the next Presidential elections in the USA, due in November 2012, President Obama would try his best to finalise a practical, acceptable and workable solution for Afghanistan.

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