

The Situation in Afghanistan and the Way Ahead

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Background

Afghanistan is a landlocked country with an area of 6,52,100 sq km and population of 22 million approximately¹. Four million Afghans live outside, mostly in Iran and Pakistan. Afghanistan is one of the world's least developed countries with 90 per cent of its population living in rural areas at subsistence level. Twelve per cent of the land is arable, three per cent under forest cover, 46 per cent for pastures, and the rest 39 per cent or so is mountainous. Its small scale industry contributes 26 per cent to its Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Four million children are out of school. Annual population growth is at 2.6 per cent or so. Life expectancy is 41 years for males and 43 years for females. The country has been fighting war for more than 25 years. The educational and health infrastructures have been destroyed during this war.

The erstwhile USSR's intervention in Afghanistan and failure of its policy there is said to have contributed substantially towards its demise and the end of the Cold War. In early 1989 the Soviet Union withdrew from Afghanistan after losing more than 14,500 troops. One million Afghan lives had also been lost. The policies followed by the USA and Pakistan in Afghanistan led to the emergence of the Taliban, who continue to be active there. Supporting Taliban served the short term interests of both these countries. Afghanistan during the period 1996-2001 became epicentre of Jihadi terrorism under the Taliban regime. It provided sanctuaries and training facilities to organisations like Al Qaeda, holy warriors of Chechnya, Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) and so on.

On 11 September 2001, terrorists attacked sensitive targets in New York and Washington DC in the USA. In October 2001, American forces launched 'Operation Enduring Freedom' against the Taliban regime in Afghanistan. This step was welcomed by most countries adversely affected by terrorism, since it suited their strategic interests. Pakistan was forced to take a U-turn in its policies. Pakistan continues to be a reluctant partner in the global war against terrorism. Its attitude in countering terrorism continues to be ambiguous. The US employed Special Operations Force (SOF) in conjunction with Northern Alliance Forces in Afghanistan in successfully overthrowing the Taliban Government. North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) mandated by the United Nations Security Council, participated as a multinational military force under American leadership. Britain contributed a big contingent. Germany, Netherlands, Norway, Denmark, Poland and Portugal have contributed only token elements.

Internal Dynamics: Afghanistan

Afghanistan is a difficult country to govern. In the past, attempts to control large number of tribes and sub-tribes, who are fiercely independent, have failed. There is a need to adopt tribe friendly approach, isolate the bad Taliban, and highlight that presence of foreign donors and security forces is for the benefit of the local population. Dependence of the locals on poppy cultivation is also difficult to reverse, given that the area is dry, barren, and very cold during winter.

President Karzai of Afghanistan has the support of a majority of Afghan leaders constituting the Jirga. He is occasionally accused of taking help of tribal leaders and warlords with dubious reputation of being a part of drug and crime nexus. Some of the chiefs and warlords have been allowed to retain their militias along with their arms which militates against the objective of disarmament. Some warlords accused of serious crimes have been made police chiefs², thereby compounding the problems of enforcing law and order and ensuring good governance. President Karzai has a good understanding of the politics in Afghanistan and has succeeded in keeping the key leaders happy by providing them lucrative assignments.

Structural Reforms

The international community led by the USA has taken a long term view of Afghanistan's security dilemma. It was felt that in addition to combating militancy, efforts to develop democratic institutions and enhancing human competence and capacities would be required. The challenges to be met are gigantic. These include creation and training of a national army and police, disarming militias and warlords, countering narcotics, and bringing about judicial reforms to put an end to impunity for violent crimes. To bring about reforms a system of 'lead donors'³ has been adopted. The USA agreed to lead military reforms – creation of the Afghan National Army; Germany the police reforms; Japan the disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration of militias and Mujahideen troops; the United Kingdom agreed to focus on the task of judicial reforms. Varying degree of progress has been made in all the five fields.

Strategic Interests of Major Players in Afghanistan

The USA and NATO Forces. The presence of the USA and NATO Forces prevents Pakistan from installing Taliban regime in Afghanistan. To counter terrorism the USA justifies military presence in Afghanistan and maintains military and logistics bases in Pakistan and Central Asia, thereby addressing some of the other global security concerns.⁴ The USA is also keeping a watchful eye on nuclear and politically unstable Pakistan which has emerged as an epicentre of Islamic Jihadi terrorism. The USA military presence in Afghanistan and West Asia ensures strategic pressure on Iran and generates more options for dealing with that country. The USA has set up an air base in Kyrgyzstan and has secured logistics support from Tajikistan and transit rights in Kazakhstan for

conduct of operations against the Taliban in Afghanistan. As a by product, the USA keeps its flag flying in oil rich Central Asia, where China and Russia also want to have a more strategic influence. The NATO Forces moved into Afghanistan on peace enforcement mission under Chapter 7 of the UN Charter. However, it has turned into a mission to combat full blown insurgency and counter terrorism. Different NATO partners have their own national rules of engagement leading to difficulties in co-ordination and achievement of synergy, essential for success of operations. Glaring weaknesses of NATO troops in terms of lack of suitable arms and equipment to fight insurgency in mountainous terrain, lack of essential weapon systems such as armed helicopters, air support, and inadequate logistics support came to light. NATO troops continue to look over their shoulders for such support from the USA. The NATO is finding it difficult to muster additional troops required from member countries. Fatal casualties of troops are having adverse impact on NATO efforts. Weaknesses noticed in conduct of operations by the NATO Forces need to be addressed for promoting operational efficiency.

Role of Pakistan. Pakistan's policy towards Afghanistan has three essential parameters. First, to achieve 'strategic depth' for military operations against India. Second, Afghanistan should be militarily weak, and not be in a position to question the Durand line. Third, it should be unstable and not be able to raise the Pashtunistan issue. During the Taliban regime (1996-2001), Pakistan achieved its ambition of 'strategic depth' and attempted to extend it to include Islamic nations of Central Asia through Taliban. Islamic religious fundamentalism and terrorism were exported to Central Asian countries through terrorists trained and funded by Pakistan and Taliban. However, after 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks on the USA, Pakistan reluctantly reviewed its Afghan policy without completely abandoning its strategy. While cooperating with the USA to eliminate the al-Qaeda and Taliban elements, it tried its best to save its Afghan policy. Pakistan is in a happy position to harass the USA, the NATO and the Afghan Government through its support to Taliban. Pakistan has helped Taliban to recoup and regroup by providing sanctuaries in Pakistan, despite being a major non-NATO USA ally. Pakistan provides logistics and other support to the USA and NATO Forces deployed in Afghanistan. Presence of the USA in Afghanistan makes Pakistan strategically relevant and it stands to benefit both militarily and economically. It enables Pakistan to obtain latest military hardware which need not necessarily be for counter terrorist operations.

Role of Iran. Iran appears to be playing real politic. While in the year 2001, Iran was anti-Taliban and pro-Northern Alliance, consequent to the USA and European pressure on Iran to stop uranium enrichment, Iran has been supporting the Taliban. It is one of the reasons cited for resurgence of the Taliban in Afghanistan. It is difficult to fathom whether the Tajiks and Uzbeks in Afghanistan can be brought together into a Taliban dominated coalition. There is a view that Saudi mediation in Afghanistan was motivated to stall Iranian influence over the Taliban. The new USA Administration may be prepared to negotiate with Iranian authorities regarding operations in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Operations by NATO and USA Forces and Resurgence of Taliban

Operation Enduring Freedom was launched in Afghanistan in October 2001. Taliban made a tactical retreat from the urban areas to the country side or crossed over into the tribal agencies in Pakistan. The NATO Forces did not perform well initially.⁶ Reasons for poor performance are said to be limited strength on ground, lack of operational experience, covert support to Taliban by Pakistan, socio-political complexities of militancy, and lavish funds available to the Taliban through illegal narcotics trade.

In March 2003, the USA opened second front of the 'war on terror' in Iraq. In March 2002, the USA began to withdraw its Special Forces, surveillance satellites, and drones from Afghanistan to prepare for war in Iraq. Distracted by Baghdad, it did not notice the happenings in tribal agencies area in Pakistan. By March 2004, the extremists were well entrenched in South Waziristan. Within Afghanistan, the USA Coalition Forces and the Karzai Government in Kabul had to depend on the cooperation of the various Mujahideen factions that had emerged to play a role in the post Taliban space. The legitimisation of their role in Afghan politics went a long way in undermining the authority of Karzai Government.

Away from the international gaze, the Taliban got an opportunity to regroup and revive its tribal and Islamic networks across the Durand line. There have been reports of Taliban controlling several districts in the provinces of Helmand, Kandhar, Uruzgan and Zabul⁷. However, they have not succeeded in establishing "Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan" their stated goal. Yet, they have kept up pressure against the Coalition Forces in southern and eastern Afghanistan by regular guerrilla attacks. The Karzai Government controls only about 30 per cent of Afghanistan. Pakistan also regained its influence in Afghanistan politics by reverting to pre-11 September 2001 policy of supporting Taliban. There appears to be a strategic stalemate with prospects of tough struggle ahead.

Recent Developments Pertaining to Operations in Afghanistan

Effect of Global Economic Slowdown. Recent global financial crisis is likely to adversely effect operations in Afghanistan. The flow of aid to Pakistan from the USA is likely to be hampered. The USA is likely to loose its economic pre-eminence. Economic slow down has led to fall in demand for oil globally. There has been substantial fall in oil prices. Russia and Saudi Arabia may also loose their clout, as oil prices fall. The USA and NATO countries may not be able to spare sufficient funds for conduct of operations in Afghanistan. There is an imperative need to reassess the situation in Afghanistan in the light of financial crisis and uncertainties.

Use of Pakistan's Tribal Areas as Base. Militants from Taliban and al-Qaeda use Pakistan's tribal areas as base to attack Afghanistan. The cross border attacks present increasingly lethal challenge to the USA and NATO efforts to wind down the war and deny terrorists a sanctuary. The Inter Services Intelligence (ISI) of Pakistan pretends to be supporting the Americans in Afghanistan even as it continues to provide shelter and assistance to Taliban leaders including Mullah Omar on Pakistani soil. A draft report by an American intelligence agency concludes that Afghanistan is in a "downward spiral"⁸ and casts serious doubt on the ability of the Afghan

Government to check rise in the Taliban's influence. If support for the Taliban does not effectively end on Pakistani soil, the Americans facing continued attacks on their forces in Afghanistan will inevitably strike on Pakistan territory. As it is, deniable air strikes by Americans have been going on since the year 2002.

Pakistan's Double Faced Policy. The USA Government's antipathy towards Pakistan military follows a realisation in Washington that it was being cheated of billions of dollars by Pakistan Army.⁹ In one incident on 10 June 2008, Pakistan Frontier Corps personnel were reported to have fired at American troops chasing terrorists across the border into Pakistan, causing the US command to call for air support to bomb the Pakistani post, killing 11 Pakistani soldiers. As per reports, the US President secretly approved cross border operations in Afghanistan in July 2008. On 03 September 2008, USA troops launched an airborne assault inside Pakistan across Afghan border killing 15 persons. Pakistan cut off supplies to the USA and NATO troops in landlocked Afghanistan, but relented after Washington put the squeeze on Islamabad. There appears to be a sense of anger across Afghanistan at having been 'double crossed' by Pakistan. However, as per media reports, the USA and Pakistan have reached a tacit agreement on Predator air strikes on Pakistan territory, under which, "Islamabad allows them while continuing to complain about them and Washington never acknowledges them".¹¹ The deal coincided with a suspension of ground assaults into Pakistan by the US Special Forces.

Opium Production and Importance of Drug Money

Afghanistan produced 6,100 tons of opium during the year 2006, amounting to 87 per cent of the world production. Contraband revenue from heroin accounted for 70 per cent of Afghanistan's GDP. In 2007, production of opium in Afghanistan accounted for 92 per cent of the world produce. According to a UN official, 'it is clear that the rebels derive an income from drugs, which they use to pay their supporters and purchase weapons'. Financial benefits that drive poppy cultivation are \$ 600 billion¹² or so. The drug money gets laundered through financial markets and international banks. Another reason for high opium production was the inability of Kabul Government to exercise control over farmlands due to not having authority over farmers. Poppy cultivating farmers were under the thumb of drug warlords, who were sustained by heroin money provided by the international drug cartel.

The Coalition Forces led by the USA had a difficult task in Afghanistan and had to depend heavily on drug warlords in order to marginalise the Taliban and al-Qaeda combine, and maintain law and order in the hinterland. The compromise helped in successful conduct of Presidential elections in Afghanistan in October 2004.

Indian Assistance to Afghanistan¹³

India has strategic and economic interests in Afghanistan. India's objective in Afghanistan is to support a peaceful, stable, democratic, and prosperous country, which should never be allowed to become a haven for terrorists. India's aid programme in Afghanistan has been a historical tradition. Its contribution amounting to \$ 1.2 billion for reconstruction of war ravaged country has been recognised the world over. It has made New Delhi, one of the largest donors for Afghanistan. India's imprint is visible across the country. 400 buses and 200 minibuses gifted by India ply in major towns and cities.¹⁴ Afghanistan Airlines has restarted with three Indian Airbus aircraft. Five Indian medical teams provide medical cover to Afghans across the country. The Indira Gandhi hospital in Kabul which was destroyed by the Taliban has been commissioned.

India has constructed the road from Zaranj to Delaram in Afghanistan linking Garland Highway to the Iran border through the Milak Bridge. India has also helped Iran in building Chabahar port in its Sistan-Baluchistan province. A 200 km road connecting Chabahar with Afghanistan is also being constructed with India's help. It will provide Afghanistan a valuable alternative and shorter route, saving 1,000 km or so, to the seaport across. It is likely to facilitate their imports and exports to and from Central Asia in addition to other countries.

Indian engineers from the Power Grid Corporation have constructed a 220 KV transmission line to Kabul across rugged mountainous terrain, despite sporadic terrorist attacks, and extreme cold conditions. Indian telecommunication engineers have digitised and restored the telecommunication networks across eleven provinces in Afghanistan. Over 2,000 Afghan nationals have undergone training in India in diverse fields. The Indian assistance programme is internationally recognised as cost effective and people oriented.

THE WAY AHEAD

Winding Down Violence and Getting Pakistan to Deliver

There are two main challenges in Afghanistan. First is to root out Taliban and al-Qaeda from their foundation. Second is to rebuild a viable state with infrastructure necessary for its sustenance, functional institutions, and a credible authority that can run its writ in the entire country. The USA Coalition Forces ousted Taliban from power in 2001, but the war is far from over. Despite engagement of International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) of about 53,000 personnel from different countries including the USA, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and so on, remnants of Taliban and al-Qaeda still continue to pose a credible threat. There is evidence of resurgence of Taliban since 2006. The attack on the Indian Embassy in Kabul in July 2008 came within the context of spiraling violence. As per reports the attack was aided by Pakistan's ISI.¹⁵

The history of personalities thrown up recently by the political system in Pakistan does not inspire confidence in the Pakistani state being able to control militant activities. On 20 September 2008, a truck bomb explosion killed more than 50 and wounded more than 250 persons, in addition to causing extensive damage to five star Marriott Hotel in Islamabad. The Pakistan Army which really calls the shots, is ambivalent in its attitude towards the home grown Taliban. In the meantime the American soldiers are getting killed in Afghanistan and they blame it on lack of resolve, and even complicity on the part of Pakistan Army, in whom the USA has invested heavily. The USA is

likely to compel Pakistan to do more. If Pakistani politicians do not deliver, the USA inevitably would lean on the Pakistan Army to brush aside the political authority and do what is necessary to achieve its objectives. There is an imperative need to adopt measures to pressurise Pakistan to curb support to Taliban and wind down violence in Afghanistan.

Building Up Military Strength in Afghanistan

Additional US and NATO Troops for Afghanistan. The ISAF has 53,000 personnel from 43 different countries. Of these more than 20,000 are USA troops. All NATO partners contribute to ISAF. It is also backed by 29,000 Afghan National Army (ANA) and 30,000 Afghan policemen. The ANA is yet to be fully trained. With a certain degree of stability returning to Iraq, some troops are likely to be reduced there. The USA establishment is veering around to a general consensus on the need to increase forces in Afghanistan. In April 2008, the USA announced a decision to send a brigade of marines to Afghanistan. The USA has suggested that NATO should also send more troops for Afghanistan. France promised 700 additional troops. Two to three additional brigades along with more helicopters and logistics support are likely to be inducted.

Logistics Support. Afghanistan is a landlocked country. Logistics support to the USA and NATO Forces in Afghanistan is routed through Pakistan. Taliban have been concentrating on cutting supply lines through Pakistan. In the event of escalation of operations, this aspect will need special attention. In April 2008, during NATO Summit in Bucharest, Russia signed memoranda of understanding and agreed to allow transportation of non-lethal logistic support over its territory for NATO'S operations in Afghanistan. This is a positive step and alternate supply route should be available for success of operations.

Ground Assaults. In July 2008, the US President secretly approved and allowed American Special Forces to carry out ground assaults inside Pakistan, without prior approval of the Pakistan Government. The assaults aim at strengthening the US war against terror, particularly on the Afghan-Pakistan border.

Afghan National Army (ANA). In 2002, it was decided that the ANA would comprise 70,000 troops. Later it was announced that the strength of the ANA would be 50,000 by the year 2009. Currently, the ANA strength is 29,000 or so. According to the Afghan Ministry of Defence, an army of 1,50,000 to 2,00,000 all ranks would be needed to ensure proper security. Due to various reasons, initially, the ANA was beset with desertions and severe logistics problems. The education level is also low. Illiteracy rate is as high as 80 per cent. Only about 20 per cent of troops possess professional knowledge. Others are former militia fighters or young recruits. However, the pace of training and retention has since improved. While the force is a long way from managing Afghanistan's security threats on its own, the building of the ANA has helped convince warlords to cooperate with the Karzai Government.

Political Negotiations

It may be said that the world can afford to abandon Afghanistan only on its peril. Various Afghan factions, particularly the Taliban are waiting for the West to withdraw from the region. It would be prudent to realise that whether Mullah Omar and Osama bin Laden live or perish, their legacy will live on until sustained international efforts are made to address the problems faced by Afghanistan, which continues to bear the brunt of the last great battle of the Cold War era. The strategy in Afghanistan should be, "to restore Afghans the capacity to govern and secure the country for themselves" 16. The common aim of al-Qaeda and the Afghan and Pakistani Taliban is to establish an Islamic caliphate. Given the mind set of Taliban, negotiations with them at present are not an option. What needs to be done is to build up military strength in Afghanistan. While there is no military solution, there has to be military pressure, whether it is in the Helmand River Valley or in the Hindukush mountains. There have to be targeted strikes against the al-Qaeda and Taliban leaders and military commanders. Concurrently, there is a need to convey to the Afghan population at large, particularly the Pashtun belt, that there is a place for them in an Afghan political settlement. By success in military operations the security forces can create the requisite environment for political dialogue from a position of strength. Once that happens, the Taliban leaders would be willing to come to the negotiating table.

The starting point for reconciliation should be the acceptability of the Afghan constitution, basic principles of democracy and human rights. In any case election of some Taliban members to the Afghan Parliament in September 2005 through democratic political process is a positive development and should be encouraged. There have been suggestions that efforts should be made to win over the good Taliban. There is scope for involving regional players including Iran, Russia, Pakistan and India for the reconciliation process. Perhaps a consultative group could be created and proposal discussed with the new US Administration and processed further. The Democratic Party of the USA in its document titled, "Renewing America's Promise" 17 focuses on ending the war in Iraq, stabilising Afghanistan and combating violent extremism. As per media reports there have been negotiations between the Taliban and Hamid Karzai Regime mediated by the Saudi monarch and facilitated by former Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif. 18 It appears that in the near future, Afghanistan is likely to continue to live with the present situation. Prospects of achieving peace and stability in Afghanistan in the mid-term period would be brighter if the structural reforms and establishment of modern political, constitutional, legal and economic institutions in consonance with the Afghan environment can be achieved to some degree with the help of the international community. Afghanistan is approaching both the presidential and parliamentary elections. Democratic rights including human rights, rule of law and freedom of media are likely to become important election issues as the country moves towards the polling booth.

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