

Introduction

The impending North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) withdrawal from Afghanistan against the backdrop of Taliban ascendancy and Karzai's recalcitrance bodes ill for South Asia's security. While the jury is out regarding the achievements of NATO's campaign in Afghanistan, India's security is likely to be gravely affected by its consequences. In the past, India had subjugated its security interests in Afghanistan to the requirements of a US more interested in Pakistani support. Now with both Afghanistan and Pakistan destabilising, India faces a security conundrum with no easy solutions in sight.

India's Engagement in Afghanistan

Indo - Afghan Relations. India, with links to Afghanistan dating to the Kushan Empire (1st century CE), has long been popular with the Afghans as a source of cultural and economic wealth. Since 1947, common enmity with Pakistan was a strong driver in relations resulting in Pakistani insecurity. More recently the Taliban, encouraged by Pakistan, sent many Afghans for jihad in Kashmir to avenge India's acceptance of the Russian intervention in Afghanistan.¹ India responded by supporting the Northern Alliance which later contributed to the NATO victory over the Taliban in 2001. Thereafter, however, NATO marginalised India to assuage Pakistan and restricted its role. India continued to engage Afghanistan in the social, educational and economic fields, emerging as Afghanistan's sixth largest donor.² It invested in major infrastructural projects including the Pul-i-Khumri power line, the Salma dam power project, construction of the Parliament and reconstruction of the Delaram-Zaranj road. It even committed to a six billion investment in the Hajigak iron ore mine. It also provided many educational scholarships and training to bureaucrats and military officers.³ While this generosity has generated considerable goodwill amongst the Afghans, it has not resulted in strategic leverage, leading to India's likely isolation on Afghanistan in the post NATO dispensation.

India's Objectives in Afghanistan. India's likely political objectives are to ensure a friendly regime in Kabul and reduce security threats to India; limit Pakistan's influence in Afghanistan; enable free access to Central Asia through Afghanistan and protect its economic investments. Its important economic objectives include developing Afghanistan as a market, investment destination and as a source for natural resources. It also wants to implement the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) gas pipeline project which could potentially transform regional energy dynamics.⁴ India can achieve these objectives only by ensuring the containment of the Taliban.

India's Limitations. India's greatest constraint is poor access to Afghanistan and the problematic compulsions of transit through Pakistan and Iran. While India is denied access by Pakistan for historical reasons, the approach through Chabahar Port in Iran has been hostage to the US-Iran tensions. Another problem is India's lack of credibility among the Pashtun groups who form the Taliban due to India's historical proximity to the Northern Alliance. The lack of the means and the will to militarily address the Taliban also has reduced India's leverage in Afghanistan.

Key Factors Affecting India's Policy

American Pressure. As NATO operations expanded into the 'counter-insurgency' phase, Pakistan's criticality grew manifold both for logistics and to supposedly contain the Taliban. Pakistan effectively leveraged this influence to pressurise the US into limiting Indian involvement in Afghanistan, accusing India of backing the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and the Baluch separatists. India meekly accepted this subaltern role and was sidelined both in the existing security arrangements and in the post withdrawal dispensation negotiations. Since India had always advocated no compromise with the Taliban, it now stands isolated as the US seeks a face-saving exit from Afghanistan.

Pakistan's Internal Dynamics. India fears that the radicalisation of Pakistan would lead to increased Pakistani support for the Kashmiri insurgency and terrorism in India. With its focus on economic growth India is loath to get mired in a conflict with Pakistan. Assuming that an overt security posture in Afghanistan would provoke radicals into more violence against India, it limited its involvement.⁵ Whether this strategy will actually succeed and ensure peace between Pakistan and India now appears doubtful.

Relations with Iran. India has depended on Iran for access to Afghanistan. After 9/11, India and Iran agreed to develop a route from Chabahar Port in Iran to Delaram in Afghanistan via Zaranj, to bypass Pakistan.⁶ This was to form part of the larger International North - South Transit Corridor (INSTC) linking India to Central Asia, Russia and Europe. Though India constructed the Zaranj - Delaram road at a cost of hundred million dollars, the port project fell victim to Iran-US tensions. Improving Iran-US relations and the prospect of Taliban rule in Afghanistan, have given fresh impetus to this project.⁷

Afghanistan Post 2014 - A Bleak Prognosis

Contours of Withdrawal. Notwithstanding Karzai's recalcitrance⁸ and the US threats⁹, Afghans hope that sufficient NATO forces would remain to ensure security. Given the blood and treasure the US has already committed, it is unlikely that it would allow Afghanistan to collapse and become a terrorist haven again. Reports indicate that a force of eight to twelve thousand is being contemplated for assisting the Afghan National Army (ANA).¹⁰ Presently, however, notwithstanding assurances from other Afghan leaders, future security dynamics remain volatile.

Political Scenario. The elections in 2014 may witness the electorate splitting along ethnic lines with the minority Hazaras, Tajiks and Uzbeks as well as long dormant groups like the Hezb-e-Islami, Jamaat-e-Islami and Junbeshi-e-Mili seeking power to counter the Taliban. Karzai may resign but is likely to back a member of his Popalzai clan for president. Overall, the competition between the Afghan National Front (ANF) and the National Coalition of Afghanistan (NCA) as well the power brokers from Western and Northern Afghanistan, is likely to generate instability in an already

fractured country.

Fall-out of the Saudi-Iran Proxy War. The growing Sunni-Shia schism in the Islamic world, characterised by covert Saudi-Iran strategic competition, is likely to have major fall-out in Afghanistan. The Saudi-Iran proxy war in Iraq, Syria and Yemen has currency in Afghanistan too as both countries have traditionally backed opposing sectarian groups. The growing chill in Saudi - US ties and improving Iran-US relations may well drive the Saudis deeper into the Taliban's fold. With both Iran and Pakistan, a traditional Saudi ally with powerful Wahabbist radical groups, bordering Afghanistan, the supply of materiel to sustain a long and bloody conflict is assured.

Security Scenario. Given the Taliban's success over the NATO, it is likely to seek power in Kabul militarily; notwithstanding, any deal it signs in 2014. While residual NATO support to Afghanistan may hinder this campaign, without substantial external assistance, the Taliban's success is highly probable. If Iraq, where the insurgency had been largely neutralised prior to the US withdrawal, is an example of how invaded countries fare post the withdrawal of NATO; the prognosis for Afghanistan, where the Taliban holds the edge, is extremely grim.¹¹ Post 2014, Afghanistan is likely to decline into an unstable, ethnically divided cauldron with the Taliban controlling the Pashtun dominated South and East while the Hazaras, Tajik and Uzbek consolidate with their militias in the North and West. The most ominous fall-out of this scenario however is that for the first time since the British rule, radical militant Pashtuns would control both sides of the Durand Line and the areas which constitute the Pashtun 'homeland', a scenario which is replete with dangerous ramifications for Pakistan.

Implications for Pakistan

Blowback from Afghanistan. Once the Taliban consolidate around the Durand Line, the TTP and anti-state Pakistani groups are likely to intensify their violence against the state. Even ISI sponsored groups, like the Haqqani Network, may not stay true as the Pakistani Army discovered when one of its generals, who espoused the Taliban cause, himself was assassinated.¹² Pashtun control over the Durand Line is likely to generate a violent campaign for the union of all Pashtun areas divided for the past hundred and twenty years. Since the Pashtuns are integral to Pakistani society and serve in large numbers in the Army, such a campaign has the potential to spark off a civil war leading to secession or separation from Pakistan on the Kurdistan model.¹³ Thus, when NATO intervened in Afghanistan it was only that country which was affected but now in 2014 as it withdraws, nuclear armed Pakistan too faces implosion.

Radicalisation, Ethnic and Sectarian Violence. Pakistan's present predicament is the result of radicalisation of its society begun by Zia. The State, including the military, is unwilling to act against radical groups who have gained popular support by their opposition to the US and its drone strikes. The diffidence of the state has caused people to lose faith in its ability to protect them and has led to every section of society clamouring for peace with the TTP, despite the latter's proclaimed agenda of sharia. Military campaigns in Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) and Baluchistan have generated intense resentment against the Punjabi dominated state exacerbating fissiparous violence. Weak central rule has led to a dramatic increase in violence in Baluchistan; and calls for a separate Mohajir state in Sindh.¹⁴ Poor security has also led hard line Sunni groups like the Lashkar-e-Jhangvi to escalate sectarian violence against Shias especially, among ethnic minorities like the Hazara. Thus Pakistan faces an existential challenge; and even the Pakistan Army, the one force which could unify the country, may find it difficult to prevent a collapse. The scenario of Afghanistan and Pakistan disintegrating violently along ethnic and sectarian lines into unstable provinces ruled by radical Islamic regimes, cannot be ruled out and has catastrophic consequences for India and the world.

Conclusion: Implications for India

The truest barometer of the fall-out from Afghanistan's security situation on India is the intensity of the Kashmiri insurgency: violence in Kashmir peaked after Taliban success in 1995, ebbed after the NATO captured Afghanistan in 2001 and showed a worrying increase in 2013, as the NATO drawdown began.¹⁵ The cease-fire between India and Pakistan on the Line of Control in Kashmir too nearly broke in 2013 for the first time since it was signed in 2003, with nearly ninety six violations by Pakistan alone.¹⁶ Thus with the growing influence in Pakistan of radical groups, many with origins in the Kashmiri struggle, peace with India becomes difficult. Post 2014 these groups, supported by the Taliban buoyed by the 'defeat' of a second super power in three decades, are likely to resuscitate the Kashmiri insurgency. For a beleaguered Pakistan a jihad in Kashmir is not entirely unwelcome as it would enable the state and the military to make common cause with the radicals and unify the people behind the state. The Pakistan military may assume, from past Indian strategic behaviour, that its nuclear umbrella would provide deterrence from Indian retribution. Therein lies the danger, as since the Mumbai attack, the Indian public's tolerance for terrorism from Pakistan and the political space for peace may have reduced considerably, setting the stage for retaliation escalating into a larger conflict with a nuclear backdrop, the contours of which may be unpredictable. If India is to prosper and avoid war, it needs to ensure its security by containing the threat from Af-Pak. The Taliban need to be stymied in Afghanistan by strengthening all anti-Taliban forces especially the Afghan Government. To achieve this, India needs to cooperate with affected countries, especially the US and Iran. Only a proactive diplomatic campaign matched by commensurate security commitments would contain the Taliban. As US dependence on Pakistan reduces, greater congruence with India on Afghanistan would emerge.¹⁷ In case India chooses to play a larger part in the US 'pivot' to Asia, the synergy would increase. This would be critical if the Taliban renege on any peace agreement signed prior to the NATO withdrawal, a distinct possibility. The rapprochement between Iran and the West too, offers India new opportunities to push for a multilateral strategy in Afghanistan. China, with great influence over Pakistan, is another unlikely partner whose interests match India's in Afghanistan.¹⁸ Given its stakes India should be prepared to commit fully to the Afghans as half-hearted diplomatic manoeuvres, vacillation over military support to Afghanistan and pandering to the US and Pakistani sensibilities may not guarantee India's security in the long term.

Endnotes

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