

Future of Afghanistan: Regressive Trends

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Introduction

Trajectory of events in Afghanistan is pointing towards a return of situation which prevailed in Afghanistan in pre-9/11 era. While Obama administration promised a *de novo* look at Afghanistan imbroglio it is rapidly losing appetite for staying the course. North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) led, International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) remains a reluctant ally of the USA in its war against terror because of a number of contextual reasons. Obama's March 2009 Af-Pak strategy announced with much fanfare and reviewed after nine months in December increasingly resembles like a strategy of 'compromise and exit'. Pakistan with its proclivities towards reinstalling a Taliban regime in Kabul appears set to play a key role in shaping the discourse in Afghanistan. Recent trends regarding developments in the Af-Pak region have serious consequences for regional security and stability particularly, for India.

Strategy of Compromise and Exit

Regressive trends were clearly evident from the two back to back conferences; one held at Istanbul (26 Jan 2010) and second in London (28 Jan 2010) which in a sense were path breakers from the normal discourse of surge and stability in Afghanistan. The Istanbul Conference (The Summit of Friendship and Cooperation in the Heart of Asia) allowed Pakistan to hijack the proposed US-envisaged 'regional powers' approach to solution of Afghanistan conflict agenda by involving Islamic Nations Coalition comprising Saudi Arabia, Iran, Turkey and a handful of Central Asian Republics bordering Afghanistan, with the explicit aim of denying India a strategic role in Afghanistan. The London Conference recognised that Pakistan, despite its duplicitous commitment to war on terror, remains a central player in any far reaching resolution of Afghan

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conundrum. The explanation that the conference included only contiguous countries does not cut much ice as UAE, Saudi Arabia and even Turkey are hardly contiguous to Afghanistan. In a sense it was a well-thought out strategy to keep India out of any regional approach.

Further, both General Kayani and the ISI Chief attended the Conference, signifying acceptance of the relevance and ossified thought processes of Pakistani military establishment in the complex puzzle that Afghanistan is. That Pakistan's military considers Taliban as strategic assets and they have the ability to manipulate them to shape favourable outcome of conflict in Afghanistan too seems to have been acknowledged, though not without reservations. From Indian perspective this is a huge development that will allow Pakistan to shape future discourse in Afghanistan with a regime in Kabul which would be beholden to Pakistan (read Pakistan military) and its world view.

If Istanbul Conference highlighted primacy given to Pakistan in shaping regional discourse, the London Conference was in a sense vindication of Pakistani centrality in conflict resolution in Afghanistan and its role in proposed reconciliation with 'Taliban'. In that sense London Conference was a clear attempt to de-hyphenate Pakistan from the Af-Pak strategy with sole focus on Afghanistan. Largely, the central outcome of the London Conference was that Pakistan, (which till yesterday was part of the problem in terms of cross border movement of militants, sanctuaries for insurgent groups and, attacks on NATO logistics supply chain together with less than successful counter-insurgency campaign) was now part of the solution and responsible to assist West in the emergence of Afghanistan as a moderate democratic Islamic nation.

The basic approach formalised at the 60-nations Conference was cash-for-peace plan aimed at weaning away non-ideological and "moderate" Taliban, fighters with the aim of their eventual participation in the governance of that Country. These outfits have consistently waged war on the US & NATO Forces in Afghanistan for the last ten years and are an integral part of Pakistani Army's grand strategy of inducing strategic fatigue and eventual mission failure in Afghanistan.

A cache of \$500 million for the reintegration and rehabilitation effort has been planned for motivating moderate or so called good Taliban on the premise that those elements could be weaned away from the hard-line elements in the Taliban leadership through attractive settlement offers. A kitty of US \$ 140 million has been created for the first year of Peace and Reintegration Trust Fund to finance the Afghan-led Peace and Reintegration Programme. Surprisingly there was no talk of militarily defeating Taliban, rebuilding Afghanistan or even promoting democracy. In fact the focus was on creating conditions over the defined time period from three to five years for creating 'notional stability' to allow foreign forces to begin leaving Afghanistan for which a date has already been set by the US President i.e. mid 2011.

Coming as it is within months of Obama's November review of Af - Pak strategy and the proposed surge with lofty goals of clear – hold and build populated centres as part of US doctrine of counterinsurgency the only conclusion that can be drawn is that US and NATO allies have come to basic determination that war in Afghanistan cannot be won and that a strategy of what can be called 'Compromise and Exit' is being put in place.

Talking to Taliban seems to have acquired increased urgency, in case the timeline of drawdown have to be strictly adhered to because of the political, financial and strategic imperatives of a prolonged war. The war in Afghanistan is not exactly popular with the US and other Western nations. Increasing fatality counts are exerting enhanced pressures on the political leadership 'to bring the boys home'. Collapse of Netherlands Government on the question of extension of the tenure of their 2000 troops in Afghanistan indicates the deeply unpopular nature of Afghan war in Europe. The developing discourse amongst the Western nations is looking at Pakistan and the notorious ISI alongwith Saudi Arabia with their pre-dominant Wahabi-Sunni proclivities as the preferred instruments of negotiating with Taliban. Pakistan would be suspicious if the Americans or others were to negotiate with Taliban without involving their military security establishment. An indication that America has accepted Pakistan as a power-broker is evident from Richard Holbrooke's statement on a visit to Kabul. He opined "Pakistan's ISI can play a role in negotiations and I support that role...Pakistan has an influence in this area and has a legitimate security interest."¹

Plan for the induction of the Taliban in power-sharing arrangement in Kabul has very significant political and strategic implications for India both in terms of its Afghan and Central Asian policies.

Pakistan's Jostling for Primacy

These developments have resulted in Pakistan becoming a key actor even as its cooperation in counter-insurgency operations remains at best lackadaisical; and operations in South Waziristan less than effective, with Tehreek-e-Taliban (TTP) sanctuaries largely intact, despite claimed deployment of 1,40,000 troops in counter insurgency campaign. However, such is the nature of dependence on Pakistan particularly in terms of logistic supplies that policy of compellence or cooperation has hardly worked. In fact as if to drive home its new found centrality, Pakistani military has suspended operations in South Waziristan, by six months to a year, as if to await the consequences of above developments; even as British and Americans troops launched a major operation in Marjah Region of Helmand province, perceived to be strongest bastion of Taliban. Further, it has also rejected the American demand of launching full scale operations in North Waziristan, an area where Al Qaeda is ensconced and from where Haqqani and other groups have been launching operations against the US and NATO troops.

Second perspective of the developments is that, having assumed a key role of the arbitrator of the Afghan destiny, Pakistan has already started to flex its muscles. Pakistani Army Chief General Kayani, fresh from attending NATO military commanders meeting in Brussels in end January averred that "Pakistan wants a 'peaceful, friendly and stable' Afghanistan; strategic depth isn't about 'controlling' Afghanistan but about ensuring Pakistan doesn't have a long-term security problem on its Western border; India's role in Afghanistan is 'unhelpful'; and more importantly Pakistan wants Afghan state institutions, including the Army and the Police force, to be fashioned in a manner that they don't pose a threat to our strategic interests"². Evidently, it is merely a declaration; unless Pakistan has a certain degree of control over Kabul it can not promote the Kayani doctrine which has been modelled on Zia doctrine with the premise that from Indus to Oxus (Amu Darya) should be the sphere of influence of Pakistan.

In yet another statement he offered to train the Afghan army, in its establishments in Pakistan, coming as it is in the backdrop of a natural reluctance of Afghan National Army (ANA) for training in Pakistani military training establishments. Given the poor political relationship this statement points to new found confidence and dare; particularly, as a well trained and popular ANA will have a substantial say in shaping both security and political discourse. The fact that ANA despite being trained by ISAF has looked for Indian support particularly for training its officer cadre and maintains very cordial and good relations with India is anathema to Pakistani military leadership. It is in above perspective General Kayani's statement that Afghan army should not become a strategic challenge to Pakistan needs to be seen. The offer to train ANA by General Kayani too needs to be seen as an attempt to prevent India usurping any training role for the ANA, either in collusion with Afghan Government or the USA.

Capture of Mullah Baradar the number two in Taliban rankings followed by arrests of two shadow Taliban governors from Karachi by the ISI is part of the Pakistan military's drive to demonstrate to the Western Coalition that if they want to exit they have to depend largely on them. The arrests also come at an apposite time amid many contradictions and murky goings on engineered by ISI regarding controlling the negotiations with Taliban. Arrests are also timed with the ongoing operations against Taliban stronghold of Marjah in Helmand. Ahmed Rashid, a well-known author on nexus between Taliban and ISI, commenting on the arrests observed that "*Pakistan now wants to dominate any kind of dialogue that takes place.*" There were reports that mullah Baradar was becoming 'too independent' of ISI and was negotiating directly with Karzai government.

These developments clearly forecast that Western Coalition working on their immediate interests has allowed Pakistan to shape the future discourse in a manner that does not augur well for strategic stability in the region and may end up in undermining all that has been achieved in nearly decade of struggle against terrorism. It is hardly important that whether the policy of divide and rule now being attempted by the UK and NATO, supported by the USA will work, what is important from Indian perspective is that despite having excellent relationship with Afghan Government

and undertaking sterling development activities it is increasingly marginalised.

Pakistan and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO)

There is yet another development that has portents for enhancing Sino – Pak collusion both in Central Asia and Afghanistan where China is developing considerable economic and strategic interests. These developments have detrimental effect on Indians interests not only in Afghanistan but also in Central Asia. SCO is closely looking at Iranian and Pakistani application for full membership of the organisation, perhaps at Chinese recommendations³. Give the strategic partnership and close military and commercial ties with China, full membership of SCO will mean that Pakistan along with China will be able to shape the strategic discourse not only in Afghanistan but in Central Asia as well. An important construct of which will be warm water access to land locked Central Asian 'stans' and access to energy and other raw material resources to Pakistan and its ports at the exclusion of India which lacks direct access. This is a major development particularly in the context of growing Chinese influence in Central Asia and attempts by it to open strategic land corridors by upgrading the Karakoram highway with a talk of a possible rail link.

Likely Future Scenarios in Afghanistan

As a consequence of London Conference, one scenario could be the so called moderate Taliban ruled Afghanistan sidelining Karzai and other leaders, leading to emergence of Pashtun influence, a scenario that could gradually set a stage for takeover by "Quetta Shura", and emergence of Afghanistan as a theocratic state, backed by Pakistan. In the bargain, if they are able to integrate ANA (reason why Kyani wants to train the ANA and ANP) then not only will they have the Afghanistan state but the army as well.

Flip side of above scenario is the possibility of a standoff between predominantly Tajik ANA supported by erstwhile regrouped Northern Alliance cadres and Moderate Taliban attempting to enhance their influence akin to developments in Nepal. This could result in a bloody civil war destabilising not only Afghanistan but the region as well.

Second scenario could be that attempts at integration of moderate Taliban run afoul on number of accounts which could include terms of demobilisation, inadequate inducement or political rehabilitation, leading to upsurge in Taliban violence. Criticality of this will be the ability of ISAF or the US residual forces to intervene; a scenario quite akin to what is happening in Iraq. Failure to do so would mean growing salience of radical forces. That such a scenario will impact Pakistan and its heartland is not fully appreciated.

Third scenario could be gradual integration of not only moderate Taliban but also northern warlords into a stable Afghanistan. This scenario presupposes, emergence of nationalistic sentiments, weaning away of moderate cadres into nation building processes, good governance and ability of ANA and ANP to maintain peace. A tall order but could come about only in a graduated fashion together with firm commitment from Western coalition to sustain.

Implications for India

As mentioned, the first two scenarios have serious implications for India. India will be marginalised in Afghanistan plus it would face the blow back of creeping Talibanisation and radicalisation, which the Muzaffarabad conclave in February 2010 has highlighted, remains a defined Pakistani goal. The developments in Afghanistan, if not contained, would also impact Pakistan with increasing impetus to Islamic radicalism. In case moderate Taliban integration is not properly managed as highlighted above, it will lead to a strategic vacuum. A Taliban victory spurred by defeating sole super power would result in Taliban becoming more aggressive.

Such a scenario is unlikely to emerge suddenly but it would be a gradual process; in fact contours of which have been laid by misperceived and hasty action as a matter of political expediency in London. India should read the writing on the wall and start shaping its political response. Some facets of Indian responses could include:-

- (a) First and foremost India must ensure close and enduring relationship with ANA in all scenarios. This means, continue ongoing collaboration and render all required assistance including training of ANA. An important point is funding of the

ANA, eventually the costs of maintaining 200,000 man strong army will become unbearable for the West; it is here India, with relatively low costs, can be an important partner.

(b) At an appropriate time open dialogue with Taliban leadership particularly, those moderate elements that are planned to be inducted as partners in nation building. Make a political judgment for fostering contacts with Northern Alliance and bordering Central Asian states, to ensure strategic foothold.

(c) In the likely scenario of instability in Afghanistan, China would also be an affected party, particularly, if Pakistan is also reeling under growing radical onslaught despite being a close ally. It would be prudent to engage China in developing post ISAF common strategy.

(d) Iran is emerging as an important player with considerable stakes and congruence with India. It is important that dialogue at highest level is initiated to forge regional consensus. India must act in own national interest, in developing strategic relationship with Iran.

With internal situation in Pakistan deteriorating, it is imperative that effective steps are initiated to protect the Country from backlash of creeping Talibanisation and radical forces. This would require dealing with disruptive forces within, including dialogue with separatists in J&K and coming to a working consensus amongst all. Additionally, strong measures would be necessary to deal effectively with communal forces.

At some stage dialogue with Pakistani leadership (political and military) will become imperative – a process which has already begun. However, it is equally important to engage Pakistani military leadership, to make them see the futility of pursuing a policy of confrontation or unjustified concerns about an Indian threat. It is time the Armed Forces are included in these parleys to provide security perspective in the dialogue.

India – USA dialogue on developments in Afghanistan, its implications on Indian core strategic interests is becoming vital. India will need to critically spell out its interests and its thresholds unambiguously, leaving no scope for misinterpretation. Last but importantly, we need to do a reality check in terms of our Central

Asian policy and SCO membership. It is important that India remains engaged with Central Asian states and uses its leverages to shape the discourse, particularly energy policy and trade.

Conclusion

Foregoing has been an attempt to highlight consequences of emerging regressive trends in Afghanistan and their implications on Indian interests. Although Pakistan may have gained centrality in bringing about stability in Afghanistan; yet it is a very complex issue with many moving parts. No easy and enduring solution is visible on the horizon. While Pakistan may be able to address its security concerns temporarily, its key role in Afghanistan is unlikely to throw up a permanent solution; it remains part of the problem as defined in the original Af-Pak strategy. India needs to carefully assess the consequences of emerging regressive trends in Afghanistan. Probable future scenarios also require a careful reshaping of policy to safeguard Indian interests and overall regional stability. India can ill afford to be sidelined and has to act proactively.

End Notes

1. Lyse Doucet, "Pakistan's Push for a New Role in Afghanistan", BBC News, February 19, 2010, available at http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/mobile/south_asia/8521823.stm
2. Zahid Hussain, "Kayani spells out Terms for Regional Stability", *The Dawn*, 02 February 2010
3. *The Dawn*, 05 February 2010