

Afghanistan Drawdown and Regional Security

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Abstract

This study attempts to present a review of the prospects of achieving stability in Afghanistan in the wake of the US drawdown in 2014. In this respect the study considers several factors including the state of preparedness of the Afghan national forces, the general elections due next year, the role of neighbours and regional powers, the growing influence of India in the politics and economic development of the country, and the challenges that Pakistan faces in its difficult relations with the Karzai government now and after the US exit. The viability of some of the scenarios that are currently under discussion has also been examined.

Key Words: Afghanistan, US 2014 Drawdown Plan, Reconciliation, Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF)

Introduction

Landlocked Afghanistan lies at the heart of Asia. The regional security of Central, South and East Asia depends upon the future security and strategic situation of Afghanistan. The withdrawal of the US-led western forces from Afghanistan in 2014, would usher the country into a new situation confronting it with the great challenge of looking after itself. Will the Afghan national forces be able to fill the vacuum left by the foreign forces? In this context, major developments which will have strategic consequences on the political landscape of the country and the region are likely to emerge that are presently keeping the world guessing.

The pull-out plan that the US President, Barack Obama, announced in his speech of June 22, 2011 is believed to have a number of challenges, though he claimed that the drawdown was from a “position of strength.”¹ This claim is contested on grounds of the current weak and unstable

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¹ “Remarks by the President on the Way Forward in Afghanistan,” White House, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/06/22/remarks-president-way-forward-afghanistan> (accessed March 24, 2013).

situation in Afghanistan as neither the insurgency nor Taliban have been brought under control. The big question what happens next has been left totally unanswered. Even the draw down scheme has no specifics. The question whether the US will retain a presence after the withdrawal continues to be debated. There is no firm commitment which is a matter of great concern not only for the immediate neighbours but also Russia and China which have reservations about America staying in Afghanistan longer than necessary. It is also argued that if America stays on with a smaller force it would be useless from the security point of view while, on the other hand, it will continue to inspire resistance from the Taliban and thus keep trouble and fighting alive in Afghanistan. In that context, it is rightly asked what has been the purpose of this decade long US engagement in Afghanistan and how it can be said that America is vacating on a position of strength.

Keeping the troubled Pak-India relations in mind India's active involvement in the affairs of Afghanistan has been a cause of worry for Pakistan which has long been complaining about India's hand in the trouble in Balochistan and its suspected support for the Baloch insurgents stationed abroad. The Indian consulates working from cities close to Pakistan's border have time and again been named in this matter. The Indo-Afghan strategic partnership agreement is said to have the potential to secure Afghanistan soil from foreign intervention and can be useful in providing some direction to the post-2014 situation in Afghanistan.² But its underlying intent reveals the ancient military strategist Kautilya's doctrine who believed that immediate neighbours should be considered as enemies but any state on the other side of the immediate neighbour should be regarded and cultivated as an ally.³ Pakistan's concerns, therefore, with regard to this agreement are not totally unfounded.

Yet over the years and all during the present unstable conditions and the insurgency there have been signs of some positive changes that have taken place in Afghanistan: a) there were 90 thousand students in the Taliban era but now there are 8.4 million Afghan students and among them 40 per cent are girls; b) life expectation figures have gone up c) there is

² GulshanSachdeva, "Afghan Reconstruction beyond 2014," *Dialogue*, vol. 13, no. 3 (January-March, 2012), http://www.asthabharati.org/Dia_Jan012/gul.htm (accessed March 30, 2013).

³ Roger Boesche, "Kautilya's Arthashastra on War and Diplomacy in Ancient India," *Defence Journal* (2003), <http://www.defencejournal.com/2003/mar/kautilya.htm> (accessed March 21, 2013).

better road infrastructure; d) the media is active e) parliament is functioning f) urban life is vibrant and civil society is growing in strength g) small industrial bases have been established providing employment to people. And there is hope that the forthcoming elections in April 2014 will play a crucial role in ensuring peace in Afghanistan but the election of a “non-Pashtun” president and unrepresentative character of the parliament and government can jeopardize such an outcome. However, the Taliban have learned from their past mistakes. In a special message to the Shanghai Summit in October 2009, the Taliban elaborated their ‘peaceful policy’ in international relations: “The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (IEA) wants to have good and positive relations with all neighbours based on mutual respect, and to open a new chapter of good neighbourliness of mutual cooperation and economic development... The IEA as per its peaceful policy wants constructive interaction with Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) members, for permanent stability and economic development in the region on the basis of mutual respect.”⁴

On the heels of the NATO invasion, the so-called ‘neo-Taliban’ regrouped in 2002 showing important discontinuities with the ‘old Taliban’ of 1994-2001. The adaptation has been tactical as well as strategic. The PlayStation controller not only represents the technological evolution of the Taliban, but also their ideological evolution, as they strive to moderate their policies and establish themselves as a mainstream independence movement”⁵.

US Presence in Afghanistan and 2014 Drawdown Plan

The problem is that the drawdown would not mean an end to war in Afghanistan. The lack of a timetable for complete US withdrawal is a key obstacle in peace negotiations with the Taliban.⁶ It remains to be seen how much of the NATO forces will be withdrawn and what type of military forces would be left behind and under what kind of legal and political framework. In fact, it is more likely, it would be a transformation of

⁴ “Open Letter of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan to Shanghai Summit,” *The Unjust Media*, October 14 2009, <http://theunjustmedia.com/Afghanistan/Statements/Oct09/Open%20Letter%20of%20the%20Islamic%20Emirate%20of%20Afghanistan%20to%20Shanghai%20Summit.htm> (January 21, 2013).

⁵ Alia Brahim, “The Taliban’s Evolving Ideology,” Working Paper no. 02/2010, LSE Global Governance, July 2010, <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/29970/>

⁶ “10 Facts about US Withdrawal from Afghanistan,” Countdown, <http://countdowntodrawdown.org/facts.php> (accessed April 21, 2013).

engagement not exactly a disengagement. According to some analysts Pentagon wants to keep between 6,000 and 20,000 US troops in Afghanistan until at least 2024.⁷ With 6,000 troops, the focus of the US mission would be on counterterrorism missions, and logistical and training support for Afghan forces would be limited. With 10,000 troops, the US could expand training and logistical support from the 6,000 troop plan. With 20,000 troops, US conventional forces could be used to patrol certain areas.⁸ Besides, the US along with a few of its close allies would be maintaining their military bases at Bagram near Kabul, Kandahar in the south and possibly another base in the northern part of Afghanistan. It is anticipated that the US forces would support Afghan forces most likely through air power including drone technology. Given the ground realities of Afghanistan's multi-shaded socio-political milieu, the reconciliation process cannot move forward in the absence of US forces. Not only reconciliation and economic development but Afghan security is also tied up with foreign military presence till the country is ready to maintain peace on its own.

However, US security does not demand its presence in Afghanistan but there are other interests — containing China and using central Asian resources, the revival of the Silk Route — for which the US would like to keep a perch in Afghanistan which it has obtained at some price and would not relinquish without demanding its pound of flesh.

Training of Afghan National Force (ANF)

Concerning Afghanistan's internal security situation a central issue is the training of the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSFs) and whether they would be able to perform their post-withdrawal functions and secure stability for the country which is also a matter of strategic concern for the neighbours, especially Pakistan. Moreover, security is not just a military concern. In a war-torn country like Afghanistan there can be no stability without addressing the absolutely crucial problems of economic development.

⁷ Jack A. Smith, "Afghanistan War May End By 2024 ... Maybe," *Anti War*, May 20, 2013, <http://original.antiwar.com/jack-a-smith/2013/05/19/afghanistan-war-may-end-by-2024-maybe/> (accessed March 30, 2013).

⁸ "10 Facts About US Withdrawal from Afghanistan," *Countdown*.

Post 2014 Scenarios

Conjuring possible scenarios in the wake of US and NATO withdrawal is a favourite pastime among observers of the Afghan situation. Much would depend upon the withdrawal strategy. If it takes place without arriving at an agreed political arrangement the possibilities are (a) the current situation of insurgency may prevail and most likely worsen vis a vis the Afghan government (b) a civil-war may break out though in the presence of substantial US military support the Taliban may not be able to establish strongholds; (c) If the new government does not represent all ethnic groups fairly, the regional warlords or power brokers will become more powerful weakening the central government (d) the central government may not be able to retain vast powers and would have to grant autonomy to various regions; (e) sense may prevail and reconciliation may take place among the Afghan groups to form a coalition government, giving representation to all ethnic groups in proportion to their numerical strength, without discrimination. This last scenario may even come into shape before the withdrawal if the general elections due in April 2014 are held on schedule and are free and fair. The international, regional and neighbouring countries would be eager to help bring peace and stability to Afghanistan as the region's economic progress depends on that. The energy needs of the countries in the region demand that the resources available in Central Asia are exploited to their full potential. All energy routes pass through Afghanistan. Lastly, the US through clear and transparent strategy can also play the most crucial role in solving the Afghan national imbroglio.

Important Geo-Strategic Factors

There are important geostrategic factors on which hinges the future shape of things in Afghanistan. These are: the US-led Western involvement in Afghanistan; Taliban's continuous insurgency; International community's efforts for reconstruction and rehabilitation of Afghanistan; the Afghan owned, US-sponsored and regional efforts for political reconciliation; future role of Pushtun-led-Taliban in the country's domestic and external affairs; and Afghanistan's land-locked vulnerabilities which turn into geo-strategic attractions for the world. These are all inter-dependent factors which would play a crucial role in shaping Afghanistan's future and developments in the region.

Regional Security Challenges

Regional security challenges that are in no way unrelated to the situation in Afghanistan as earlier mentioned are the regional energy needs and availability of such resources in the Central Asian Republics (CARs) critical human issues like poverty, that mars much of South Asia, resolution of lingering disputes like Kashmir through dialogue and negotiations, and developing mechanisms to fight transnational threats such as terrorism and extremism. The spill over effects of the war in Afghanistan, and the precarious domestic situation of regional states could easily open another front in the war against terrorism.⁹ The troubles in the region around Afghanistan are not amenable to early solution. There is unrest in the CARs, the Iranian nuclear crisis keeps ticking, Pakistan is yet to overpower terrorism and forces of sectarian strife, ethnic unrest in Xinjiang province of China. This situation acquires a new dimension in the context of America's future designs in the region. Some indications of the US plans in this region can be seen in its interest in the 'New Silk Route' and its new security architecture in 'Asia Pacific'. The Indo-US nuclear deal and America's interest in promoting Indian role in Afghanistan with Russia keeping close watch on these developments are factors that point to a change in the big powers' game plan in this region.

India's Growing Influence in Afghanistan

Given the fast pace of India's growing participation in the development works in Afghanistan, it is assumed that India can exploit the unstable situation in Afghanistan and it may turn Afghanistan into a battle field of proxy wars between Pakistan and India. India is giving military training to 200 Afghan officers per year; it is also providing training to Afghan Intelligence personnel.¹⁰ As earlier mentioned its consulates in Afghanistan are engaged in subverting activities against Pakistan¹¹ In fact with American support it is assuming its role as a successor to the US in that troubled land. This scenario would create instability instead of bringing peace in the region as it would be unacceptable to Pakistan. As the British

⁹ Muhammad Munir & Muhammad Nawaz Khan, "SCO — Building regional security mechanism," *Frontier Post* (Peshawar), April 28, 2012, <http://www.thefrontierpost.com/article/160180/> (accessed February 12, 2013).

¹⁰ Dr. Raja Muhammad Khan, "Afghanistan: Simmering Conflicts after 2014," *Pakistan Observer* (Islamabad), April 22, 2013, <http://pakobserver.net/detailnews.asp?id=204461>

¹¹ Ibid.

historian and writer, William Dalrymple, has warned that Afghanistan could be 'second Kashmir' once the US forces pull out from Afghanistan... there might be another proxy war between India and Pakistan. Therefore, Indian assertion of its influence on Kabul for the sake of its security is not a valid argument at the cost of regional security.¹² For these reasons Pakistan looks askance at India's activities in Afghanistan. India faces no direct threat from that distant neighbour. Pakistan is the buffer state that keeps India out of any trouble flowing eastward from the northwest.

Pakistan's Interest in Afghanistan

The last three decades of fighting in Afghanistan have had a serious spill over effect on Pakistan, adversely affecting its economy and law and order situation. Pakistan has had to accommodate millions of Afghan refugees, and even at present there are almost two-and-a-half-million Afghans spread over the country up from north down to the south. If Afghanistan destabilizes, Pakistan suffers and vice versa. For Pakistan, the fundamental concern is the effectiveness of Afghan National Security Forces, because an unplanned withdrawal will weaken government's control over the rough elements in ANSF which could further burden Pakistan's security forces. Hence, assessing the risks of further infiltration from Afghanistan is vital for the security of its western borders.¹³ Pakistan had a bad experience in the first Afghan war (1978-88) when US and western states left Pakistan alone to face the aftermath of the US inspired war against soviet occupation.

Today Pakistan's foreign policy towards Afghanistan is based on two principles: a) restraint and b) responsibility. The first means not to meddle in the internal affairs of Afghanistan and the second means Pakistan can play a vital role in reconciliation process by offering itself as a facilitator. Pakistan wants stable and independent Afghanistan which is an important factor for its own security.

Policy Options before Exit

- The US should focus on reconciliation. 'Reintegration' and 'Reconciliation' (RR) Strategy will be the best strategy if the post withdrawal uncertainties are to be avoided.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Rana Athar, "Pakistan beyond 2014," *Pakistan Observer* (Islamabad), March 30, 2013, <http://pakobserver.net/detailnews.asp?id=202090>

- For Afghan reconciliation and rehabilitation process, there is a dire need for a combined three-pronged strategy i.e., a) At international level, b) At regional level and c) At national level.
- A “Negotiation settlement” is needed for a mutually shared government among all the political parties active in Afghanistan. The northern alliance and the southward Pushtun-led-Taliban should be given due participation in the parliamentary political process, which would be the best possible post-exit scenario.
- Afghan society has tribal structure and diverse ethnicities which the US has ignored. The tribal structure must be given importance and the old Afghan “National Covenant” should be revived.
- UN peacekeeping forces may take the responsibility to train the ASF so that the regional stakeholders concerns regarding the training of ASF by the US and Indian forces are addressed.
- The international community has been focusing mainly on the northern region. The south has suffered more and needs greater economic development and larger share in the financial assistance pledged by the international community for the next four years.
- Another matter of concern in the not-so-very-friendly Pak-Afghan relations is the problem of acceptance of the international borders — the so called Durand Line. The US can mediate in resolving this issue between Pakistan and Afghanistan.
- Afghanistan as an energy corridor offers the best space for exploiting the Central Asian resources for meeting the expanding needs of the energy starved economies of the region.
- Establishing a free trade zone between Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK) in Pakistan and Afghanistan would be of great help in curbing illegal trade between the two countries.

Conclusion

Realistically speaking, the assumption that Afghanistan without planned exit of the foreign forces would remain stable after 2014 is too naïve a hope. At the present stage there is no real reconciliation process going on between the Taliban, the US and the Afghan government. And there are

worrying factors like giving India a larger role than what its relations with the Taliban justify at the cost of Pakistan which is an integral part of the solution? A realistic approach in light of the ground situation daunts the stakeholders. They have to formulate a peace plan keeping in mind the cultural, political and geographical settings of Afghanistan. If the drawdown happens without political reconciliation then the chances are the Taliban will have a field day as there would be multiple “power centres” of warlords having the loyalties of their like-minded groups and tribes and a weak central government as a helpless watcher over the looming chaos. This is a scenario on which most observers agree. The withdrawal is being seen as a tacit surrender to inadmissible realities. Optimism is rare and based on conditions that the major players do not seem to be addressing.

After three decades of war and instability, Afghanistan needs peace. But this is something that the Afghans themselves need to understand the most. And the sooner the better as 2014 approaches. ■