
Contemporary Security Dynamics in Afghanistan

A Report*

The impending US drawdown in 2014 has unleashed a raging concern on the security situation in Afghanistan, more significantly its impact on the regional and international strategic environment, including India. Afghanistan has emerged unstable and volatile at the end of a decade of US led intervention and will continue to remain so post 2014 due to the divergent security interests of all the regional countries as also because of the peculiar existing internal dynamics in the country. Although many things remain uncertain, the return of Pakistan as the Taliban's patron is almost certain. Iran, Russia and the Central Asian Republics will also seek spheres of influence. Saudi Arabia will do all it can to reduce Iran's gains. China is suspicious about the re-Talibanisation of Afghanistan and its impact on its own Muslim population in Xinjiang. India will worry about the effects of a Taliban dominated, if not ruled, Afghanistan, on the security situation in Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) and elsewhere. The US will continue to worry on Afghanistan becoming a terror launch pad.

Pak-Afghan Relations: Lessons from History

Afghanistan is a strategically important landmass for the security of the Indian subcontinent. Ironically, this aspect was highlighted in the Defence of India Plans of the British till 1947 but the Indian government failed to revise such plans. The Survey of India records that whenever a great power controls Afghanistan, it has an impact on Punjab (present-day Pakistan and northwest India). The situation in Afghanistan will have serious implications for Pakistan's security. The return of the Taliban will increase fundamentalism and terrorism in the region. The degree

* This report is a summation of a seminar, held at Jammu, on contemporary security dynamics in Afghanistan, jointly organised by the University of Jammu and 16 Corps, Army HQ, March 29-30, 2012; Col Sanjay Pande and Mr Rohit Singh represented CLAWS to attend the event; report compiled by Mr Rohit Singh.

of Pakistani control over the Taliban is in doubt. The Pashtuns comprise only 42 percent of the total population of Afghanistan so taking care of them alone would not solve the problem. North and West Afghanistan are out of Pakistan's influence. A resurgent Taliban would also put pressure on the Durand Line which has not been recognised by any Afghan government since 1893. The Pashtun belt has already extended to Balochistan, Sindh, Karachi and even south and central Punjab.

Internal and External Dynamics

Afghanistan is a tribal society which zealously guards its powers and scorns any attempt by the Centre to tread on its toes. Another aspect which merits attention is that although all the Taliban are Pashtuns, not all Pashtuns are Taliban, meaning, therefore, that although the Taliban aims are a key driver, there are other competing aspirations as well amongst all the ethnic communities including the Talibanless-Pashtuns. So a lasting solution has to accommodate many aspirations other than the Taliban's. The last mentioned aspect is important because it hints at the fallacy of the Pakistani leadership thinking that the best way to mitigate an Indian presence in Afghanistan and to avoid a civil war is to promote a negotiated settlement between Karzai and the Afghan Taliban. Pakistan continues to demand that any talks with the Taliban should not ignore its interests, particularly those related to Indian activities in Afghanistan. Another problem with Pakistan's strategy and the failure of the present US involvement is that the ethnic minorities –Tajiks, Hazaras, and Uzbeks – can be expected to resist any outcome that restores the Taliban to power.

Socio-Political-Economic Indices and Political Instability

Afghanistan is the largest global illicit opium producer, with nearly 10 percent of the country's population being engaged in poppy cultivation. The abysmal indices which give rise to political instability, as charted by the National Centre for Policy Research in Afghanistan, are as follows:

- Unemployment and poverty 93%
- Social fragmentation 63.8%
- Return of migrants 56.8%
- Poppy crops trafficking 56.8%
- Lack of rule of law 66.4%
- Civil society and political parties 30.4%
- Trust and legitimacy of government 63%

-
- Islamic radicalism and Taliban control 57.2%
 - Weak justice 54%
 - Great power game 81.6%
(as external causes of political instability) (Pakistan-43.6%, Iran-26.2%, Russia-10/3%, US-16.41%, Britain-3.36%)

India's Strategic Interests in Afghanistan

India's strategic interests in Afghanistan can be attributed to historical factors and linkages, trading ties with Afghanistan, transportation of Indian goods to Central Asia, limiting Pakistan's influence, ensuring a favourable Afghan regime, making an influence in Balochistan through Afghanistan to provide a handle on Pakistan, possibility of energy supplies from the Central Asian Republics (CARs) being transported through Zaranj-Delaram to Chahbahar, and limiting the re-emergence of the Taliban. A peaceful and stable Afghanistan is in India's interest. These interests notwithstanding, there are clear impediments to Indian efforts in Afghanistan, including the rising levels of terrorism and violence, attacks on the Indian Embassy (one in 2008 and the other in 2010), attacks on Indian staff/technicians/workers and Pakistan's efforts to restrict Indian influence, and the resurgence of the Taliban.

Russia, CAR, China and India: Stakes in Afghanistan and Strategies

Russia is the biggest stakeholder in Afghanistan. It enabled the deployment of US forces for Operation Enduring Freedom through the CARs. It also reluctantly accepted the appointment of Hamid Karzai as president at the Bonn Conference in December 2001. Iraq was among the first circle of Russian interests (due to its oil dependency) and the US attack on Iraq in 2003 completely changed the Russian attitude towards the war in Afghanistan. The breaking point came in 2005 when Russia felt that the US presence in Afghanistan had turned into a policy of containing Russia through the CARs. The US stepped up its efforts to take the CARs out of the Russian fold by way of supporting the regimes through projects and funds. Russia saw an American hand in the Fargana Valley unrest in Uzbekistan in 2005. Russia then turned towards China. It also urged Kyrgyzstan to throw the Americans out from Manas air base. Since 2006, the US-Russian arrangement on Afghanistan has been on a downward spiral, with Russia becoming increasingly critical of the war in Afghanistan. The CARs and Russia do not want the war to fail as they would be the first ones to bear the thrust of radical Islam. The CARs have

a high degree of social power and have been experts in playing one superpower against another. The flip-flop over the Manas air base deal is one such example where Kyrgyzstan eventually bargained for a high amount of money for renewing the lease for the US.

India's dilemma is that apart from terrorism, it has no common geo-political interests with the CARs. Post-2001, India's regional diplomacy in the region has weakened while that of Pakistan has increased tremendously. The CARs have commonality of interest with Pakistan. India is the only country which deals with the CARs on a bilateral basis. Every other country or stakeholder has entered into a regional multilateral forum. This is a serious handicap and India must accelerate the attempts to gain Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) membership.

Chinese Objectives in Afghanistan

- The Xinjiang region is contiguous with areas having Uighur populations – in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. The Chinese fear that a spill-over of the insurgency in Afghanistan may also impact the situation in Xinjiang. Training of Uighur militants in Pakistan is also a major security concern for China. The assassination of the Chinese ambassador in Kyrgyzstan highlighted the security vulnerabilities for China.
- The exploitation of mineral resources in Afghanistan is a prime objective for China. It is already extracting copper from Aynak and has interests in the oil fields of northern Afghanistan. It also wants to develop communication routes to Middle East and Africa through Pakistan and Iran.
- In 2001, China maintained a studied indifference towards the US presence in Afghanistan. It was the first major US presence on China's borders after the Vietnam War. Today, the Chinese attitude has transformed rapidly and a permanent US presence is completely unacceptable to them. In 2005, the US sounded China for access through the Wakhan corridor to Central Asia but the proposal was not accepted by the Chinese. It is wary of American presence in Central Asia in addition to the recent pivot to East Asia announced by President Obama.
- The last two-three years have seen acceleration in China's interests in the CARs and Afghanistan and it became increasingly wary after Obama became US president. China has been upholding the economy of the CARs with the construction of tunnels, cement factories and roads and now wants to shift gears in Afghanistan. China has formed an Af-Pak-China forum. It has major stakes in building a gas pipeline from Turkmenistan (East-West corridor).

-
- China and Russia have overlapping interests in Afghanistan, but not similar. Eventually, China would like to pursue its independent policy in the region.
 - All the players in the region work in a very big way with Pakistan; 70 percent of the total goods to Afghanistan and Pakistan are supplied through the Northern Distribution System.

US Policy in the Af-Pak Region: Emerging Contours

The international forces in Afghanistan have had a mixed result. They have been successful in establishing a government and building up the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF). The elimination of Osama Bin Laden has been a major success. But have their objectives been met fully? Al Qaeda has been decimated in Afghanistan but its network has sprung up in other parts of the world from where it retains the ability to launch attacks on US interests worldwide. The US Central Command says that they have achieved a great deal as far as degrading the Taliban is concerned. But much of it remains rhetoric and the Taliban remains well entrenched on the ground.

An effective counter-insurgency strategy takes time to evolve and requires boots on the ground. US forces do not use host nations properly while conducting operations. The international forces take on the primary tasks and use the Afghan National Security Force (ANSF) in support roles or in a subsidiary manner during an operation. This has impeded the capability of the ANSF to operate independently once the foreign troops start leaving. They should be in a position to carry out operations independently. Training the ANSF with US methods was an incorrect approach. The emphasis should be to train them in the Afghan way of fighting.

Conclusion

A resurgent Taliban is unlikely to repeat its earlier mistakes of disempowerment of women and ravaging of the Bamiyan Buddha type incidents. However resurgent the Taliban may be, the fact that its control and that of its mentor (Pakistan) over North and West Afghanistan is tenuous means that even under Taliban dominated Kabul, there is room for interference by other regional powers. Pakistan will not be able to dominate the Taliban. It will also not like to revive strong Pashtun nationalism which will bring to the fore the Pashtun demand for redemarcation of the Durand Line. With different countries having divergent interests, all have contributed to instability and will continue to block a regional consensus.

India can do little to prevent the Taliban's return in a big way in the future Afghan political structure. It cannot bank on forging a Northern Alliance type resistance as it has few takers. Besides, the earlier experience found the Northern Alliance fraught with inherent contradictions. Additionally, such a move will be viewed with distaste by Karzai, presently sympathetically inclined towards India. New Delhi needs to do more than its \$2 billion aid package. It needs to invest economically in a few provinces which matter, besides reviving the flagging Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) and Iran-Pakistan-India (IPI) gas projects. It must invest in viable relations with the CARs (for example, 27.775 percent of all medicines in the CARs are sourced from India). Besides, India needs to have a national security strategy and decide on the kind of footprints it wants to have in its neighbourhood.

Pakistan is unlikely to cede ground to India as it wants Afghanistan as a client state. In spite of the views of a certain section, Balkanisation of Pakistan and Afghanistan is unlikely. As a result, more terror may spill over into Kashmir. India may wish to open direct lines with the Quetta Shura or other Shuras but that may prove difficult, hemmed in as they are by the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI). Pakistan, too, is undertaking economic and developmental activities in a big way in Afghanistan. In fact, Pakistan can access areas which India cannot. Its control over the Taliban is stronger than ever. Also, the Taliban, too, is better organised. Cooperation between India and Pakistan is unlikely. However, in either of the two unfolding scenarios—a Taliban takeover or of civil strife—it is the Pakistanis who will be sucked into the vortex. It is unlikely that Pakistan will be able to control that situation without cooperation from all the regional stakeholders and ethnic communities.

Although the Taliban is resurging, it will have to improve its record and correct the wrongs committed in the past, especially towards treatment of women and their empowerment. Post the US drawdown, Afghanistan will continue to pose many challenges to the regional and international strategic environment. India, on its part, will do well to remember that when the Taliban last took over, it led to increased infiltration and suicide attacks in Jammu and Kashmir (J&K). Post 2014, this situation may reemerge. In the coming future, Indian thinking should likely be driven by maintaining its economic stakes in both the CARs and Afghanistan, and preventing the influx of terrorists into India. India will also have to take into consideration other handles like Iran, and Balochistan, besides creating resources to exercise its influence in the Pashtun belts of South and East Afghanistan, through selective economic investments.