

A valuable examination of Pakistan's stakes and options in Afghanistan. Continued instability in that country will have serious consequences for Pakistan. Its proclivity to overplay its hand and miscalculate its strengths has already fractured its polity, ruined its economy and caused immense suffering to its population. Pakistan no doubt has leverages which it is trying to exploit for achieving its objectives in Afghanistan, some of which are unachievable. It is also trying to exploit its vulnerabilities in a high stakes game of creating strategic depth in Afghanistan. Like many times in the past, it may again miss an opportunity to help in establishment of peace in the region if it continues to play a high stakes, zero-sum game at the cost of all its neighbours. There are limits to the patience of other stakeholders. USA appears to have reset its objectives and draw down of US and ISAF troops is on course. The writer outlines three plausible scenarios that could emerge. A useful exercise in perspective thinking.

The draw down of US forces in Afghanistan has been announced. Some other countries forming part of ISAF have also declared their intention to scale down their presence in line with the US withdrawal. It is as yet unclear whether ISAF will withdraw completely by end of 2014. That would depend upon resetting of strategic objectives by USA, effectiveness of Afghan National Army (ANA) and Afghan National Police (ANP) to manage the security, political and security situation within Afghanistan and more importantly, the role played by Pakistan. From the indicators emanating from Washington it seems likely that US will exit Afghanistan by 2014, with or without tangible success having been achieved while efforts to create space for some degree of involvement will continue. The role played by various actors; USA, Pakistan, Taliban, Afghan leadership and regional powers will have a bearing on the emerging situation. However, role of USA and Pakistan - along with its proxies, will have the most significant impact. Outcomes in Afghanistan will have a profound bearing on Pakistan's own security and stability and will also largely depend upon what role it plays in next 17 months and thereafter. Pakistan has choices to make. It can help in establishing peace in Afghanistan by helping in

concluding a peace process involving all stakeholders or it can act as spoiler and obstruct the process of stabilisation of Afghanistan by holding the process hostage to its own unattainable objectives. The choice it makes will determine whether Pakistan itself comes out of the quagmire of economic stagnation, internal strife, fractured polity and diplomatic isolation. This article examines the emerging situation, Pakistan's objectives in Afghanistan, what is achievable by it and the likely role that Pakistan will play by 2014 and beyond.

Emerging scenario

The domestic political and economic situation in USA is forcing it to recalibrate its strategy towards Pakistan but there are no easy options available to it. The situation in Afghanistan is not showing signs of any appreciable change for the better. The 'surge' seems to have had limited impact. Continued economic difficulties and falling public support for war in Afghanistan, have forced the US President to announce draw down of almost one third of US troops from Afghanistan by end 2012. The current buzzword is that draw down is 'inexorable'. Efforts to negotiate with Taliban for reconciliation are aimed at ending the conflict in Afghanistan and permitting an honourable withdrawal

of coalition forces. It is not certain at this stage, however, if US will withdraw all its troops or withdraw irrespective of the situation prevailing at that point of time. Development of new and large US bases in some parts of Afghanistan indicates that USA is preparing for a long haul for reasons beyond Afghanistan, even if it has to withdraw most of its troops from Afghanistan by 2014. However, some voices in that country are questioning the wisdom of continuing to bleed in Afghanistan and are calling for redefinition of US interests in the region. It seems that the US administration is examining its exit strategy having given up on the initial objectives of nation building and establishing democracy in Afghanistan. It has made contact with Taliban for negotiating a power sharing deal and ending the conflict but the latter are convinced that they can win the war simply by not losing it and therefore need not make concessions necessary which will take the interests of other ethnic groups on board. Besides, it is not certain if Taliban leadership will abide by the agreed terms of reconciliation. Pakistan can help in bringing Taliban to the negotiation table but will do so at its own terms.

Most analysts argue that Afghanistan cannot be stabilised without full cooperation from Pakistan. It is this

Pakistan's likely role



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commonly held belief that makes Pakistan act difficult and withhold cooperation unless its own interests are factored in. Pakistan believes that it holds most, if not all, of the aces and that ultimately it will prevail in installing a Pakistan friendly regime in Kabul sooner or later as long as it continues supporting Taliban and allied militants. That this approach has already fractured its polity, ruined its economy and destabilised the country has not persuaded Pakistan to rethink its Afghan strategy. Despite some sane voices emanating from within Pakistan, warning of catastrophic consequences of persisting with the policy, the

leadership in Pakistan, particularly its army and ISI, seem to believe that the risk is worth taking. Pakistan appears to be convinced that USA cannot win the war in Afghanistan and the only options available to it are to cut a deal with Taliban with full Pakistani involvement or concede defeat and withdraw after which Pakistani proxies will gain power in any case. This is the reason why Pakistan continues to play truant. It is ironic that whereas Pakistan does not wish to see America winning the war in Afghanistan, at the same time it wants America to facilitate achievement of its own objectives in that country. It would be pertinent

here to examine Pakistan's objectives in Afghanistan.

Pakistan's objectives

Pakistan has not officially articulated its objectives in Afghanistan in a clear and comprehensive manner. But these can be deduced from the utterances of its leadership from time to time. Pakistan's Army Chief, General Ashfaq Parvez Kayani, while interacting with the media at the Army Headquarters on 01 February 2010, is reported to have said that Pakistan has no interest in establishing control over Afghanistan, while adding that a

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peaceful Afghanistan would provide Pakistan with 'strategic depth' in the region. Strategic depth *vis-à-vis* India can only be achieved if there is a Pakistan friendly and anti-India regime in place in Kabul. That appears to be main Pakistani objective in Afghanistan. The other identifiable objectives are also contingent upon establishment of a Pakistan friendly regime in Kabul. These appear to be: to get recognised as the main, if not sole, arbitrator in Afghanistan; to get Durand Line recognised as the final border between Pakistan and Afghanistan; to sever the linkages between the Taliban and the Pakistani terrorist groups and; to build a 'strategic regional consensus' extending from Ankara to Islamabad. While attempting to achieve its objectives, Pakistan would also not like to let go of the economic aid from USA, the EU and China. Once its geo-strategic position improves Pakistan can hope to garner support for its disputes with India. Each of these objectives comes with some assumptions and caveats.

Although validity of the idea of 'strategic depth' has been questioned by many commentators within the country and outside but it still fires the imagination of decision makers in Pakistan as can be made out from the statement of Gen Kayani mentioned earlier. In fact, from early days of its separation from India, Pakistan has been obsessed with the idea of creating strategic depth *vis a vis* India. It has at its core the military centric notion that in the event of war with India Pakistan's military would be able to operate from Afghanistan to offset its

geographical disadvantage of very little depth to its East. Kamran Shafi, a noted Pakistani columnist writing in *Dawn* in early January 2010, raised a valid question when he said that presuming India loses its good sense and foolishly goes to war with Pakistan, "Will our army pack its bags and escape into Afghanistan? How will it disengage itself from the fighting? What route will it use, through which mountain passes? Will the Peshawar Corps gun its tanks and troop carriers and trucks and towed artillery and head into the Khyber Pass and on to Jalalabad? Will the Karachi and Quetta Corps do likewise through the Bolan and Khojak passes? And what happens to the Lahore and Sialkot and Multan and Gujranwala and Bahawalpur and other garrisons? What about the air force? More importantly, how can Afghanistan be our 'strategic depth' when most Afghans hate our guts, not only the northerners, but even those who call themselves Pashtuns?"

The non-military concept of strategic depth could be that faced with a much stronger hostile neighbour to its East, Pakistan can ill afford to have another hostile neighbour to its West. It therefore wishes to install a regime in Afghanistan which it can control and manipulate and which does not raise the difficult question of validity of the Durand Line. It also realises the importance of Afghanistan in forging strategic links with Central Asian Republics (CAR) and West Asia. This version of the concept of strategic depth contains both geopolitical and economic elements within it. Perhaps it also encapsulates the desire of becoming a leader of the Islamic world. The question that arises therefore is whether Pakistan is using Taliban as a strategic depth to establish its hegemony over Afghanistan and extend its reach beyond or it is using them to create a strategic depth in Afghanistan? As regards Durand Line, Pakistan was unable to get even Taliban agree to its recognition as the final border between the two countries. It is difficult to foresee a Pashtun dominated regime in Afghanistan formally endorsing Durand Line as the recognised border. But sadly, Pakistan is working to establish a Pashtun dominated regime only. Also, the idea of forging a 'strategic regional consensus' to checkmate India will remain an unfulfilled dream since the world has moved on since the

idea was originally conceived. It is imperative therefore for Pakistan to redefine its interests and objectives in Afghanistan and reassess its strategy to achieve them.

Lt General Hamid Gul, a known Jihadi ideologue and ex ISI Chief, was quoted in an article by Arnaud de Borchgrave having told Hubertus Hoffmann, President of the World Security Network that "The future government need not necessarily be exclusively Taliban. Pakistan will have to deal with whoever is in command in Kabul ... and Taliban have reformed substantially compared to their earlier conduct in governance." There may be a calculation behind this approach that a weak government dominated by Taliban will enable Pakistan to manipulate it for its own ends. It would help it in negotiating with jihadis operating within Pakistan and to reduce India's influence in Afghanistan. Therefore, a certain degree of instability will serve Pakistan's interests.

What is achievable

Amidst the noise of breakdown of trust between USA and Pakistan, particularly between the two militaries and the intelligence agencies, the two countries are talking to each other. Influential people from both sides are talking of working together to achieve common goals and objectives rather than emphasising lack of trust. Unfortunately, goals and objectives of USA and Pakistan are asymmetric. For Pakistan, Afghanistan is central to its national strategy whereas for USA it is just one part of its global strategy. Pakistan has to live with the reality of Afghanistan. Due to shared Pashtun ethnicity and unrecognised border, potential for discord with Afghanistan will always remain. In purely military terms, no other power has mastered Afghanistan in the past and Pakistan will certainly not be able to control it in future given its own lack of comprehensive national strength.

The idea of 'strategic depth' is a mirage. Many people believe that the concept of strategic depth, in its military or non-military sense, is kept alive deliberately to shape the narrative of relations between India, Pakistan and Afghanistan due to Pakistan's pathological hatred towards India. The idea serves to justify its misconceived



and single minded determination to deny any role to India in Afghanistan. What is lost on Pakistan is that it cannot gain any form of strategic depth without the consent and cooperation of not only the people of Afghanistan but also its neighbours. It is hard to imagine that Afghans, be it Taliban or the others, will support Pakistan's idea of gaining strategic depth at the cost of their own interests.

Uneasy bedfellows

Even if a Pakistan friendly regime is established in Afghanistan following the final withdrawal of ISAF, Afghan nationalism and Pakistani nationalism will ultimately clash. It is in Afghanistan's interest to integrate its economy with the entire region, including CAR, Iran, India and China rather than being dependent on an economically and politically fragile Pakistan. No regime in Afghanistan, even if it is Taliban dominated, will countenance control of its strategic choices by Pakistan.

Pakistan can also reap economic benefits flowing from export of Afghan and Pakistani minerals to resource hungry India, China and the West, transit fees from oil and gas pipelines running from CAR and Iran and expansion of regional trade. That would help in improving infrastructure in Pakistan, generate revenues and employment to absorb part of the rising population and wean them away from extremism. An alternative narrative of nationalism based on economic growth, moderation and inclusiveness will have to be created and sustained over a period of time for it to succeed. Indian interests in Afghanistan are premised

on historical, economic and geopolitical considerations and are not security centric. India does not see its and Pakistan's relations with Afghanistan as a zero sum game.

Pakistan's interests would also be served better if it realises that exclusive focus on Taliban, representing Pashtuns, would always put them at odds with other ethnic groups. If Taliban emerge as the sole power centre in Afghanistan, other ethnic groups will come together and challenge Taliban rule, giving rise to continued conflict and even a civil war. Therefore, it needs to broaden their engagement with Afghanistan involving all the ethnic groups and regions. All plausible outcomes from its political and economic isolation and exacerbated instability are likely to be dangerous for Pakistan. Its very survival as a State may become doubtful. Of course it will affect the region as a whole but its impact on the Pakistani State will be catastrophic. It is therefore rational to think that Pakistan will be amenable to course correction and will settle for achievement of moderate objectives of getting Taliban to negotiation table, agreeing to a power sharing deal and reduced presence of US troops in Afghanistan beyond 2014, guaranteed financial support for itself and share in reconstruction and rebuilding effort in Afghanistan.

Taliban calculus

The process of negotiation and its successful conclusion are not likely to be easy. Accommodation of interests of Tajiks, Heratis, Hazaras and Uzbeks besides the Pashtun warlords and tribal elders will be as important as accommodating Taliban. Taliban

perhaps view the situation differently. They understand that the resolve of the coalition partners is weakening and they can be exhausted and driven out without conceding anything as long as Pakistan continues to support them. They may also be calculating that Pakistan has no choice but to support them if it wants peace in FATA and Pakhtunkhwa. But since the survival of their leadership and the movement itself is so critically dependent on Pakistan, Taliban may be amenable to talks under certain conditions of their own. Regional powers like Iran will also need to be taken on board for any solution to work. Peace in Afghanistan cannot be sustained without the cooperation of regional powers. It is certain, however, that a full withdrawal of US and ISAF without achieving a degree of stability and political settlement in Afghanistan will result in chaos on either side of Durand Line and Pakistan will be in jeopardy. It is hoped that Pakistan will realise the gravity of the situation and change course. Its behaviour along with that of other players makes the following scenarios plausible in next 5 to 10 years.

Scenario 1

Draw down of troops by USA proceeds simultaneously with negotiations with Taliban. Faced with the prospects of economic squeeze and strategic break with USA, Pakistan nudges Taliban towards negotiations. Taliban agrees to share power in Kabul with exclusive control of the East and the South. It also secures the guarantees for integration of some of its fighters in the ANA and ANP, with others to be rehabilitated economically. USA retains the right to maintain five bases,

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including Bagram. Focus shifts to consolidation of security situation and economic reconstruction of Afghanistan and further draw down of US forces from Afghanistan. Despite occasional hiccups, security and stability returns to Afghanistan. Economic situation improves with TAPI project making progress and major mining projects taken up by various countries. Foreign militants, other than Taliban, remain on Pakistani soil and it continues to face internal security challenge. US dependence on Pakistan is substantially reduced. Economic and military support to Pakistan is also reduced. International community, including India, joins hands in economic reconstruction in Afghanistan. Pakistan becomes a small player in Afghanistan but gains a measure of stability and its economy improves riding on increasing investments and trade flow.

Scenario 2

Draw down of ISAF proceeds as planned with about one third strength leaving Afghanistan by end 2012. Some areas in the North and the West handed over to ANA and balance of ISAF (mainly US and British troops) concentrate in the South and the East. Drones are relocated to Afghanistan. Greater reliance is placed on intelligence, employment of Special Forces, drones and air strikes to neutralise Taliban in the absence of a peace deal with them. Training and equipping of ANA and ANP continues. Taliban employ hit and run tactics against the ISAF bases and patrols but focus their attacks on ANA, ANP and political elements within Afghanistan. Political settlement with Taliban makes little headway. Continued violence and rising ascendancy of Taliban in the South and East Afghanistan emboldens militants East of the Durand Line. Dependence on Pakistan

for logistic sustenance of remaining ISAF troops comes down with increased cooperation from Russia and CAR. Military and economic aid to Pakistan is reduced substantially and Pakistani economy is kept on life support. Fearful of economic meltdown, Pakistan cooperates in a limited way - against Al Qaeda but not against Taliban - and keeps the supply lines open despite occasional attacks on convoys. ANA and ANP are better trained and equipped and establish a semblance of peace in the North and West Afghanistan with some help from US forces. Reelection of US President Obama in 2012 and improved economic situation enables USA to continue its involvement till 2014 and beyond. Status of Forces agreement with Afghanistan enables USA to occupy recently completed five or seven bases. USA stops combat mission except against specific targets. Pakistan's cooperation with USA in resolving the conflict comes down further in response to reduced financial assistance. Russia, China and Iran oppose anticipated long term US presence in Afghanistan but are unable to do anything about it in the absence of any viable alternate regional solution. Prospects of an eventual bifurcation galvanise the Afghan nationalists on both sides of the divide, to find a negotiated solution. Pakistan is forced to rethink its strategy and comes round to encouraging Taliban to negotiate to prevent possible emergence of Pakhtunistan incorporating territory on either side of Durand Line.

Scenario 3

Following the partial draw down of ISAF by end 2012, lack of progress on political front due to internal politics in Afghanistan, combined with continued economic strain on economy in the US force it to rethink the strategic calculus of continued US presence in Afghanistan. USA decides to withdraw completely from Afghanistan by 2014, retaining the option of launching air strikes in case its interests are threatened by terrorism emanating from the region. In the interim, focus shifts to strengthening of ANA and ANP and building up a coalition of anti-Taliban warlords and regional leaders so that Taliban do not overrun the whole country. Regional players step in to support their favoured groups and frustrate Pakistan's desire to control Afghanistan through their proxies. Afghanistan is embroiled

in serious internal strife beyond the control of Pakistan. China is unwilling to replace USA as Pakistan's economic saviour.

Impact on Pakistan

None of the three scenarios discussed above meet all Pakistani expectations. Scenario 1 envisages a stable and unified Afghanistan but not under Pakistani tutelage. Pakistan will be reduced to being a minor player in Afghanistan. Should Pakistan realise its limitations and moderate its goals in Afghanistan this scenario offers it substantial dividends. If Pakistani behaviour remains path dependent Scenario 2 is more likely to emerge; driven by nationalistic impulses within Pakistan and miscalculation on the part of Pakistan military about its indispensability. Initially it may appear that Pakistan is in the driving seat but ultimately it will have to cut its losses and support reconciliation from a position of weakness. The desperation of the situation and violence induced fatigue is likely to force various players to come to some solution. Pakistan will get no credit for such an outcome. Scenario 3 will be the worst for Pakistan. Its internal security situation will deteriorate further and it will lose external financial and military support also. The terrorists within Pakistan will be emboldened and take on the Pakistani security forces directly. Anxieties about threat from India will get exacerbated. Pakistan may like to believe that America's strategic interests in the region are hostage to Pakistan's decisions. These misconceptions have the potential to change the scenarios in unpredictable manner.

Pak miscalculation?

Pakistan may miscalculate because of some realities and some myths prevailing in Pakistan. Some of those are; ISAF will be unable to stabilise Afghanistan and will be forced to withdraw; USA cannot achieve its war aims without Pakistan's cooperation; participating countries in ISAF have no heart in continuing in Afghanistan due to domestic compulsions and USA by itself will not be able to sustain the war effort alone; main supply routes for ISAF passing through Pakistan provide it a leverage which can not be reduced to any appreciable degree; possession of nuclear weapons, its strategic



location, close strategic relations with China and its Islamic identity give it an advantage which USA can not overlook. Finally, Pakistan is aware that as the United States draws down, it will still need Pakistan to cover its withdrawal.

Undoubtedly, US influence over it is hugely unpopular in Pakistan. Both the civilian government and the military, including the ISI, are accused by the Pakistani public of being deeply influenced by and working under US directions and waging a war against its own people. Pakistan army believes that it will be able to negotiate with the home grown jihadis once USA leaves Afghanistan. Release of known Lashkar-e-Jhangvi leader Malik Ishaq from jail in July 2011, presumably for opening a line of communication to the militants, points in that direction. Despite realising its precarious economic situation and critical role USA plays in keeping it going, many people in Pakistan are resentful of the dependency on USA. They think that with remittance from expatriates, reduced expenditure on military operations and resultant uptake in economic activity the country can manage itself without aid and support from USA. To be seen as non-cooperative or hostile to USA helps Pakistani establishment regain their credibility with the people. Pakistan army in particular is trying to create an impression of its strength and ability to withstand American pressure and strengthening the perception that it alone is capable of safeguarding Pakistan's interests. It is mindful of the pitfalls in following an approach which will make USA harden its stance towards Pakistan but it perhaps believes that USA cannot let Pakistan collapse because of its geo-strategic importance and

fear of nuclear weapons falling in the hands of jihadis. This seems to be a misperception because the US which is facing difficult choices in managing its own finances may very well decide to call Pakistan's bluff and restrict or stop financial support to an unwilling and intransigent partner if it persists in undermining US prestige and objectives.

Pakistan's problems are not merely economic in nature. Its militant proxies are following their own independent agenda, some of them having turned against the State and infiltrated the military. The sectarian and ethnic clashes in Karachi and elsewhere, inter-tribal conflicts in FATA, fractured polity, high rate of unemployment, angry population facing shortages of food and power and almost total disconnect between the military and the political class are the problems that appear insurmountable to any objective analyst.

Conclusion

Presently there is little evidence of Pakistan having redefined its national interests vis a vis Afghanistan despite severe strains on its polity, security and economy. Its military still seems to believe that it can control and manipulate the militants fighting against the ISAF in the West and against India in the East. In its appreciation, its support to USA is the main reason for growth of militancy within Pakistan. It also believes that once its goals in Afghanistan are reached and a Pakistan friendly regime is installed in Kabul, USA will withdraw most, if not all, of its troops from Afghanistan and the Pakistani militants will have no reason to continue fighting against the State. Those who continue to fight can then be brought to heel by a combination of

dialogue and military action. Pakistan perhaps calculates that it is too important or dangerous for the world to let it fail and hence despite withdrawal from Afghanistan, USA and the West will continue to provide financial support to it. Shortfall may be expected to be made up by improvement in economy and assistance from China and the Middle Eastern countries.

Pakistan fails to realise that the international community sees the situation differently. If the situation deteriorates to the extent that the ISAF is forced to withdraw without stabilising Afghanistan, there will be utter chaos and perhaps a civil war will engulf Afghanistan. Pakistan does not have the capacity to handle such a situation by itself and therefore has to revisit its strategic goals in Afghanistan.

Now that US withdrawal is likely to become inexorable, Pakistan will have to prepare itself for post withdrawal scenario and shape the scenario if it can. It would want to use the period before withdrawal to legitimise its role and deny regional powers, particularly India but excluding China, influencing the outcome in Afghanistan. However, Pakistan does not want USA to withdraw immediately for fear of anarchy in Afghanistan and loss of financial and military support to itself (US\$ 20 to 22 billion since 2001 and more promised for future). It may therefore reluctantly fall in line and not obstruct negotiations between Taliban, Afghan government and USA. But it would like to share the negotiation table or be present in the side room. The degree of cooperation will be guided by its appreciation of its own leverages and vulnerabilities. **USA**

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