

Afghanistan and the Region

P. Stobdan

P. Stobdan is a Senior Fellow at the Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, New Delhi.

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Summary

Uncertainty continues to prevail on the Afghan front. In fact, one is not sure what might happen in Afghanistan during the course of the next year. Logically speaking, answers to all of Afghan problems can easily be found within the regional context of India, Russia, China and Iran and their involvement in the economic and political process of stabilization. But the Afghan leadership is not likely to uphold the regional choice now.

In its 16 March 2015 Resolution 2210 (2015) extending the mandate of United Nations Assistance Mission for Afghanistan (UNAMA), the UN Security Council drew an optimistic scenario for the country. From all angles, Afghanistan is a transformed place: a robust unity government; stronger security force; better living standards; higher GDP growth; better schools for children and greater presence of women in the workforce. It further noted that Afghanistan is free of al-Qaeda training camps, the Taliban is subdued, and there is an improved atmosphere in its ties with Pakistan.

Not every observer is, however, convinced that Afghanistan is stable. The Unity Government, created to end the crisis set off by widespread election fraud, remains inherently divided and fragile. Power sharing among coalition groups remains hung up due to delay and differences. Ashraf Ghani is facing accusations of centralizing power, which he justifies as necessary for fighting corruption and better governance. Critics say the Chief Executive's role remains ill-defined and they suspect that Abdullah Abdullah will be eventually sidelined. Already, the First Vice President Abdul Rashid Dostum is feeling marginalized. He was distraught and believed to have broken down during a recent meeting of the National Security Council.

Moreover, Afghanistan's corrupt elite remains divided on a host of issues ranging from tackling terror, the Taliban and the economic agenda. The country is already facing a budget deficit. The external assistance needed to run the economy and ensure security is likely to gradually dry up. And not all are convinced that regional players are unlikely to resume their proxy war any time soon. No one can also wish away the fact that Afghanistan is tied to geopolitical issues relating to Pakistan-India, Iran-Saudi Arabia, and China-US-Russia. Given all this, the expectation is that Afghanistan may either fail or at best muddle through by struggling to survive as a divided country ruled by regional and tribal warlords and fiefdoms, and posing a significant security concern for the region and the world.

Clearly, if the current regime is able to maintain a robust strategic partnership with the United States, the prospects of regional powers upsetting the internal situation of Afghanistan through proxy groups would be minimized. At the same time, Kabul would also be able to play a balancing role in terms of cooperating with Pakistan across the Durand Line, protecting the interests of India, Iran, China, Russia and the Central Asian Republics - all in line with the interests and supervision of America.

So how will the regional powers respond to the evolving situation in Afghanistan? To be sure, none would like to see the reversal of the current situation; instead every country would wish that the Unity Government builds on the achievements of the past decade. They would also want the Afghan security forces to retain professionalism to deal with internal threats. Nevertheless, the perspectives and policy nuances of each regional player differ significantly.

Clearly, no one is visualizing Pakistani activism in Afghanistan that would cause a further deterioration in the situation in Afghanistan. The discourse is actually shaping itself more

in favour of a plausible collective Russia-India-China effort. Such a regional consensus is feasible under the Russia-India-China or SCO frameworks. But the Americans and Europeans are unlikely to encourage such an alternative. Notwithstanding that, the main problem impeding the prospect relates to differing regional concerns and interests of the three countries – a principal reason why, despite their display of well-meaning intentions and quiet diplomacy, a definite idea in this regard is yet to take a concrete shape. To get a clear idea, it is important to analyze the current policy approaches of the regional countries towards Afghanistan.

Pakistan

To be sure, Pakistan's importance for Afghanistan is indisputable. But Islamabad has so far failed in every Afghan mission it has undertaken and has instead ended up worsening its own internal security situation primarily in FATA. Pakistan initially propped up Gulbuddin Hekmatyar and his network, but the Benazir government later abandoned this old protégé in favour of the Taliban in October 1994, of course with American consent. Washington's great confidence in Pakistani assessments of Afghan developments created the real mess. It had to pay the prize in the form of 9/11 and all its attendant consequences.

Having successfully pushed the Taliban to Kabul on 27 September 1996, Pakistan tried many stunts to gain full diplomatic legitimacy for the Taliban. Its initiatives – Murshed's plan for a regional conference, setting of a "political commission," "Ulema Commission," "five-nation" conference, "shuttle-diplomacy," and many others – all essentially designed as exercises to exclude India from the peace process, did not cut much ice. All other countries looked askance at Pakistan's diplomacy and questioned its neutrality especially given its attempts to scuttle several UN sponsored peace initiatives such as the "six-plus-two" meetings aimed at fostering reconciliation among the warring Afghan factions.

Pakistan now claims to have made a "strategic shift" in its approach towards Afghanistan in the wake of the October 2014 Peshawar school attack. The leaders of Pakistan and Afghanistan have now shared a vision for realizing common security and economic interests. They are committed to targeting terrorist groups hiding across their border "without distinction." Islamabad wishes to enlarge the scope of cooperation beyond trade, terror and border management to include a "full range" of military-to-military ties including the training of Afghan infantry brigades. Pakistan sees the Taliban testing the Afghan National Security Forces, even as it also sees "encouraging" signs for a peace negotiation with the Taliban and expects others to support the process. What Islamabad wants from the international community is "strategic patience" to achieve this goal.¹ Clearly, it has been

¹ Adopting Resolution 2210 (2015), Security Council Renews Mandate of United Nations Mission in Afghanistan, Role in Overseeing International Civilian Efforts (16 March 2015), <http://www.un.org/press/en/2015/sc11817.doc.htm>

pushing for greater Chinese involvement to offset India's economic engagement in Afghanistan, especially in the context of regional cooperation and promoting trans-regional energy and connectivity projects.

However, controlling the Pakistani strategic dream in Afghanistan may not be easy. And this time around, Islamabad may also face other competitors especially from China and Iran, both of which are inclined to develop greater economic and strategic stakes in Afghanistan. The fear of India interfering in Afghanistan will continue to haunt Islamabad. Even if Islamabad manages to turn a new page in its relations with Kabul, the tribal dynamics (terrorist hideouts, border violations) along the Durand Line will not disappear soon. One also has to watch for duplicitous moves by Pakistan, which has clearly been running with the American hare and hunting with the Taliban hounds.

China

Until now an onlooker on the Afghan scene, China's likely role in Afghanistan is increasingly gaining importance. Even though the activities of the Taliban in the past spilled over in to Xinjiang, Beijing remained supportive of the position adopted by its close ally Pakistan. But at the same time it remained careful so as not to cause any suspicion among the Russians and other regional countries about its position. Until recently, China did not see the containment of fundamentalism as its priority and believed that its close military ties with Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and Iran will assuage the problems. In fact, China viewed Afghanistan as another venue where India can be kept pre-occupied through Pakistan. However, at the height of the Taliban rule, China had made a subtle change in its position on Kashmir: it no longer directly supported the Pakistani position.

In the changed context, China's role in stabilizing Afghanistan is viewed as critical. China needs to stabilize Afghanistan to fortify its own strategic interests as well as counter the threat of extremism in Xinjiang. Akio Kawato, a former Japanese Ambassador to Central Asia, recently pointed out that "Afghanistan is not alien for China.....it was a vital part of the Silk Road and was a conduit to India from where China imported Buddhism." He further noted that the Taliban, more 'civilized' now than in 2001, may induce China's strong involvement in Afghan affairs.

It appears that Ashraf Ghani initially prodded China, perhaps on Pakistani insistence, to play a major strategic role in Afghanistan. Pakistani leaders reportedly told their Afghan counterparts to part ways with the US and instead hold China's hand. Beijing was perhaps hesitant, except to play diplomacy and contribute through investment, economic and trade cooperation. In fact, China hosted the Heart of Asia conference, institutionalized the China-Afghanistan-Pakistan trilateral dialogue, and played host to a two-member delegation from the Taliban in November 2014.

Not just Pakistan, even Iran, Russia and India would welcome China's greater engagement in Afghanistan. However, the Chinese themselves admit their inadequate understanding

of tribalism and lack of experience with combating a Taliban-type ideological insurgency. China's own experience in handling Uighur separatism is not a success story. Clearly, Beijing will continue to rely on Pakistan and other Islamic countries to deal with the Afghan chaos.

Afghanistan is not terribly an important priority for China and it will not undermine US efforts because the situation there is linked to China's domestic situation in Xinjiang. It is also linked to the great-power equation and balance of interest in the Asia Pacific – Taiwan, Japan and elsewhere. Therefore, although US-China interests are not greatly aligned in Afghanistan, China has avoided playing a zero-sum game and has instead sought harmony with US interests. This approach is likely to continue.

For now, Beijing is pushing for an inclusive national reconciliation, as it understands the complexity of the challenges involved in Afghanistan. China's interests are clearly focused on Afghanistan's untapped raw material reserves: copper, iron ore, gold, oil, gas, massive veins of rare earth elements including critical lithium (estimated at \$1 trillion dollar worth) which are eminently suited for its own needs. Surely, it would seek investment opportunities but without assuming security responsibilities. China would still like the Americans to ensure the security of Afghanistan and want countries like Turkey and India to build Afghan infrastructure. All China wishes to do is connect resource rich Afghanistan to its own industrial towns. Billions of dollars have already been spent in mining and Chinese visitors to Kabul are invariably seeking mining privileges. Several road, railway, pipeline projects are underway to link Western China to Afghanistan through Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan.

The current 'civilized' Taliban appear to be bargaining with China for recognition but it is also important to note that Afghans in general have shown aversion to non-Muslim outsiders extracting underground riches. Surely, they have no particular liking for the Chinese, for they represent an alien culture and thus a danger to Islam. China's excessive investments could invoke powerful resource nationalism among Afghans in the longer term. The same argument was, in fact, made about Chinese investment in Central Asia as well. But just like they benefited from the Soviet fall and Russian decline, to be sure, the Chinese hope to gain in Afghanistan too.

Russia

Russia's position on Afghanistan is a restrained one: avoid direct intervention and stay the course of neutrality. There were moments when Moscow adopted an ambivalent position – with one section advocating a hard line and the other cautioning against a repeat of past mistakes. However, it is continuing with a hands-off position realizing that Central Asia now separated Russia from Afghanistan. Instead, the Afghan issue is being linked to Russia's own Central Asia policy. By expressing unwillingness to bear the burden of facing the Afghan challenge alone, Moscow has made itself indispensable for the Central Asian countries. Russia considers Central Asia as the first line of defence against any threat

emanating from Afghanistan. It has strengthened its military position in the region directly or through the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO).

India's good friend Russia is unlikely to get drawn back into Afghanistan. Russia had in fact changed its position in 1997 soon after the Taliban captured Kabul. Since then, Russia has pursued the diplomatic option of engaging with the Taliban and accommodating Pakistan. The visit by the Russian Deputy Foreign Minister, Viktor Osurlyuk, to Islamabad in June 1997 and Pakistani Foreign Minister Gohar Ayub Khan's visit to Moscow a month later changed the context. At that time, India, of course, had expressed anxiety over the uneasy developments in the context of Russia's links with the Taliban.

In recent years, Russia's ties with Pakistan have increased manifold. Moscow hopes that Pakistan will dissuade the Taliban, if they come to power, from interfering in areas of Russian influence. Moscow has in fact been praising the Pakistan military's anti-terror fighting capabilities and has sought cooperation. This increased Russian confidence about Pakistan could form a strong alternative diplomatic backdrop for any future Russian engagement with Kabul. Clearly, Moscow has resumed engagement with all sections of the Afghan elite and has even revived some of the Soviet era economic projects including a decision to spend \$20 million for restoring its old cultural centre in Kabul.

Curiously, Ashraf Ghani, during his recent visit to Washington, cited the role of other powers in Afghanistan's development but he conspicuously skipped any mention of Russia. Nevertheless, Russia remains concerned about the geographical spread of ISIS activities and desires joint action. The Russian complaint is that NATO has been un-cooperative with the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) for battling the threat of drug trafficking. So far, Russia's concerns have been heavily focused on the impact of Afghanistan on Central Asia, especially the threat of extremism and drug trafficking. Today, it is more concerned about renewed American geopolitical ambitions in Afghanistan and Central Asia in the context of the Ukraine crisis. Moscow might be trying to assess that possibility, but for now Russian policy would be based on the principle drawn from the Great Game precept of "not striving for victory but avoiding defeat." This line is likely to persist unless Russia's core interests are threatened.

Iran

Iran has deep interests in Afghanistan. From the Iranian perspective, one of the important aspects of the Afghan imbroglio is that the conflict there is being used as a means to isolate and contain Iran in the region at all costs. Tehran always felt besieged by a hostile America and its proxies in Afghanistan. The Taliban's capture of Herat in 1997 was the most important counter-measure by Pakistan and US/Saudi oil companies to push a gas pipeline project across Afghanistan. Tehran is maintaining a cautious approach in the new circumstances unfolding now. The Iranian Foreign Minister visited Kabul in January 2015 to discuss bilateral strategic cooperation, including on issues relating to security. Iran's concerns are tied to protecting the interest of the Hazaras as well as combating cross-

border terrorism and drug trafficking. Iran prefers a regional approach to include other neighbours such as China, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan to address Afghanistan's problems. For the time being, Tehran is preoccupied with the nuclear talks. A possible thaw in US-Iran relations will have a significant impact on the Afghan situation.

Conclusion

Uncertainty continues to prevail on the Afghan front. In fact, one is not sure what might happen in Afghanistan during the course of the next year. Logically speaking, answers to all of Afghan problems can easily be found within the regional context of India, Russia, China and Iran and their involvement in the economic and political process of stabilization. But the Afghan leadership is not likely to uphold the regional choice now.

One must also be clear that problems in the Af-Pak are linked to the interests of Saudi Arabia. Both Pakistan and Afghanistan are sectarian allies of Saudi Arabia. Besides, both have shown a tremendous capacity and willingness to participate in the geopolitics of major powers like the United States. Pakistan has amply showed its willingness to compromise on its sovereignty. It has acted as a mercenary state, bending over backwards to comply with the desires of its masters. As for Afghanistan, one can do no better than cite what Aftab Kazi, a Senior Fellow at the Central Asia-Caucasus Institute of Johns Hopkins University, Washington DC, had noted: "Afghanistan politics has been destabilized so very much that the country needs a Genghis Khan like leader to destroy the old in order to create a new political order in Afghanistan-Pakistan region. Even such a reordering will take at least a century."

Afghan history is about Pushtun tribalism. The Taliban is also about Pushtun brutality. The Taliban's brutality vis-à-vis any foreign invasion will not end, nor would their differences with the northerners – Tajiks, Uzbeks and Hazaras. The Russians, British-Indians, Soviets, and Pakistanis have burnt their fingers in Afghanistan. The last to add graveyards in Afghanistan include the Americans, the Europeans and an assortment of al Qaeda elements drawn from various Arab countries. Now, the ISIS wants to recreate Khorasan in Afghanistan – let them also try. In fact, the UNSC recently concluded that ISIS gaining a foothold in Afghanistan is not so much a function of its intrinsic capacities, but its potential to offer an "alternative" flagpole to which otherwise isolated insurgent splinter groups could rally.² More than that, Afghanistan will remain home for a host of insurgent groups such as the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) fighting against Pakistan, the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) against China, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) against Central Asia and the Lashkar-e-Tayyaba (LeT) against India. These groups will keep the interests of regional countries drawn to Afghanistan.

² Ibid.