



Afghanistan: A Firewall is Better than Partition

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Summary

With the West increasingly looking at disengagement from Afghanistan, it is time regional stakeholders think about the long term ramifications of such a withdrawal. This issue brief advocates that in the event of such a situation arising in the future, it would be prudent to firewall the AfPak region from all sides with only a minimal foreign military presence inside Afghanistan. Such an approach would not only free the United States from aimlessly paying for Pakistan's follies and haemorrhaging its own economy and military, but also drive its rival China to act more responsibly in the global fight against terrorism. India has been fairly successful in firewalling the radical blowback emanating from Pakistan in the past and need not be overly worried about the impending US withdrawal.

With the United States increasingly looking to start the process of disengagement from Afghanistan, including wooing the reconcilable among the Taliban leadership, and entering into a deal of some sort with them to pave the way for an eventual withdrawal of foreign forces, there is growing interest in not only how India views the prospect of a peace deal with Islamist forces in Afghanistan but also how India proposes to handle the post-withdrawal situation. Successive Western interlocutors have been engaging the strategic community in India to try and fathom India's reaction and response to the troop withdrawal.

As things stand, Indians would ideally like to see the West succeed in its mission of cleansing Afghanistan of the influence of Islamist terror groups like the Taliban and al Qaeda. But if the West fails to achieve this objective, as is becoming increasingly apparent, then it is unlikely that India will step in to replace them in Afghanistan. While India could provide some military assistance in the form of advisors and trainers to anti-Taliban forces in Afghanistan, the chances of India putting military boots on the ground are simply remote. Instead, India would most likely prefer to beef up its security along the border areas in order to insulate itself from the adverse impact of Taliban ascendancy in Afghanistan.

This issue brief analyses the Western security dilemma in the strife torn state of Afghanistan and suggests an alternative regional security strategy to contain the radical forces emanating from the AfPak region.

Busting the Myth

Given the turn of events in the AfPak region, New Delhi in all likelihood will try to insulate itself from a spill over of Islamist terrorists into India. After all, the source of India's insecurity is not Afghanistan; it is Pakistan. And Pakistan will continue to be a problem regardless of whether or not Americans stay in Afghanistan. The much tainted Taliban becomes a menace for India only if they are deliberately directed or pushed into India by their Pakistani patrons or if they take over the Pakistani state. While the former is something that India has been contending with for over two decades now, the latter possibility will become a problem not just for India but also for the rest of the civilised world. Short of direct intervention in Pakistan to rescue and reform the Pakistani state, the only way to restrict the fallout of a Talibanised Afghanistan and the inevitability of this development resulting in a Talibanised Pakistan is for the West to take a cue from India and follow a strategy of firewalling the AfPak region.

There is little doubt that the strategic vacuum that will be created by the withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan will be filled by the Taliban and other assorted terror groups who comprise 'jihad international'. This will certainly have local, regional and global repercussions. At the local level, Afghanistan will either descend into chaos and civil war or else revert to the graveyard peace that the Taliban imposed between 1996 and 2001.

With the Taliban in control, Islamic radicalism will of course get a fillip. But more serious is the imminent prospect of Afghanistan becoming a sanctuary and launching pad for all varieties of Islamic terror groups from around the world. While the immediate impact of such a development will be felt by countries in the region – the Central Asian states, Iran, and China – the global ramifications of a Taliban regime in Afghanistan in terms of the spread of Islamic terrorism cannot be understated.

But the country likely to be worst affected is Pakistan. Rather than providing Pakistan ‘strategic depth’, a Taliban victory in Afghanistan will transform the country into a ‘strategic black hole’ for Pakistan. In its obsession with sponsoring, supporting and providing sanctuary to the entire Taliban leadership and directing its war effort against the US troops in an elaborate double-game, Pakistan does not seem to have thought things through.

Pakistan’s Strategic Pipedreams

As is their wont, Pakistanis are expecting that the gradual withdrawal of Western forces will be a best case scenario for them for several good reasons.

- First, Afghanistan becomes a client state of Pakistan, which will then be in a position to dictate terms to the Taliban leaders who will be beholden to Pakistan for supporting them against the Americans.
- Second, the Taliban either agree to share power with other players like the Northern Alliance and Hazaras or occupy the entire Afghanistan.
- Third, the Taliban will forsake militancy and al Qaeda and, in return, a grateful West will continue to ply both Afghanistan and Pakistan with billions of dollars in aid.
- Fourth, the Taliban will not give refuge to *Tehrik-e-Taliban* Pakistan (TTP) and other Islamic terror groups operating in Pakistan and will help Pakistan to either tame or eliminate these groups.
- Fifth, as a result of these measures, the wave of terrorism inside Pakistan will end and the TTP and others will give up arms and become part of the mainstream.
- Sixth, there will be no reaction in the frontier provinces to the disproportionate use of force by the Pakistan army against the Islamic insurgent groups, and the people of the area will simply forget the collateral damage caused by the army’s operations.
- And finally, there will be no export of jihad from Afghanistan to any other part of the world except to India.

Clearly, this scenario is based on some extremely ‘heroic’ assumptions. Given that the TTP and Punjabi Taliban groups like the *Lashkar-e-Jhangvi*, *Jaish-e-Mohammad* and others are part and parcel of the larger Islamist movement, what are the chances of the Taliban

being able to keep them on a tight leash, much less handing them over to the Pakistani authorities? Will the Islamists lay down their arms simply because the Americans have left the region or will they get emboldened by their success in defeating the sole superpower and try to impose a `talibanesque` regime in Pakistan? Will groups like the Haqqani network end their relationship with the al Qaeda only because Mullah Omar, who is living under Pakistani protection, asks them to do so or will the radicals repudiate even the *Emir-ul-Momineen* as a Pakistani agent?

If the Taliban regime refuses to tow the Pakistani line on the TTP, what will be Pakistan's options? Invade Afghanistan? Or enter into a Sudan-like deal with the Islamists and enforce the Taliban version of Islam in Pakistan?

Firewall versus Partition

The bottom line is that the US strategy in Afghanistan is not working and is unlikely to work in the foreseeable future. By pursuing the current strategy, the United States is essentially reinforcing failure and that too at a huge cost in men and money. What the US needs is an alternate strategy that will address its strategic security concerns at a fraction of the cost being incurred at present. One such strategy is the 'partition' plan that former US ambassador to India, Robert Blackwill, has put forward.

While Blackwill's plan is much better than the other alternatives that he has discussed (and debunked) in his article, 'A de facto partition for Afghanistan', there are serious problems with this plan as well. These are:

- First, it is unlikely that the partition plan will find favour with any of the Afghans. Whatever their differences with each other, there is hardly an Afghan, whether Pashtun or non-Pashtun, Shia or Sunni, pro- or anti-Taliban, who supports the partitioning of Afghanistan. Despite ethnic animosities, Afghan nationalism remains strong as ever. A partition plan, imposed by an imperial power, could therefore backfire by affecting a tenuous unity among all Afghans against foreign forces.

- Second, the Blackwill plan advocates partitioning Afghanistan along ethnic lines and calls upon the US to defend the predominantly non-Pashtun west and north and leave the Pashtun-dominated south and east to the depredations of the Taliban. The mistake Blackwill makes is that he implicitly assumes that the Pashtun areas end at the Durand line. Whereas the fact is that the geographical space that the Pashtuns occupy extends well beyond the Durand line in the east and should ideally end at the Indus river. In other words, a Taliban dominated Pashtun entity in Afghanistan will invariably extend into the Pashtun areas under Pakistani control which constitute a natural hinterland for the Afghan Pashtuns. The creation of a de facto Pashtun state in Afghanistan will result in an explosive cocktail in which radical Islam and Pashtun nationalism will combine and spill over into Pakistan, which will find it impossible to combat this new force. Effectively,

Blackwill's plan will not just partition Afghanistan but could end up splitting Pakistan along the Indus, with a Taliban dominated Pashtun state (de facto if not de jure) in the north west and perhaps an independent Baloch entity coming into existence in the south west of Pakistan.

■ Third, a partition plan in which the US and other foreign forces maintain their presence in Afghanistan, albeit in the north and west, will continue to give the Islamists from around the world a legitimate cause to continue with their war. The al Qaeda will get a further lease of life as it will support the Taliban cause of unifying the country and expelling foreign forces.

■ Fourth, a war in Afghanistan between the Pashtuns and non-Pashtuns will almost certainly destabilise Pakistan, the impact of which on regional and global security has not been factored into the partition plan. Given the unrelenting and unchanging Islamist trajectory of the Pakistani state controlled by a military with a jihadi mindset, it is unlikely that US dollars will help to 'persuade' Pakistan to re-evaluate its strategic orientation and 'concentrate on defeating the Pakistani Taliban and containing the Afghan Taliban'.

■ Fifth, a partition of Afghanistan will raise serious issues about how the US will work its logistics lines for its 40,000 to 50,000 troops. While the cost of logistics for such a large force running through the northern route will be less than the estimated \$120 billion per annum being incurred presently, it will still be huge - around \$40 to 50 billion.

All that the partition plan hopes to achieve can be better obtained through the firewall strategy and at a fraction of the cost. Under the firewall strategy, all foreign forces will pull out of the AfPak region, i.e. no boots on the ground except for a handful of military units, advisors and intelligence operatives. The fallout of a Taliban takeover of Afghanistan, and eventually Pakistan, will be contained by building a massive firewall around this region so that the Islamists and their Pakistani patrons stew in their own juice. In large measure, parts of the firewall around AfPak are already in place; all that remains to be done is to further beef up these firewalls.

Firewall as a 'Regional' Security Strategy

On the western side, Iran will serve as a natural firewall. The Iranians are reportedly in dalliance with the al Qaeda and Taliban only because of their apprehensions about the United States. Once the US quits Afghanistan and perhaps also Pakistan, the decade-old sectarian rivalry with the Sunni extremist Taliban would surely erupt and force Iran to firewall its border with Afghanistan. In the north, the United States can help the relatively moderate Central Asian states monetarily, militarily and technically to build up their capacity and border defences to prevent radicalism from spilling over into their countries. In the east, India has over the last decade or so fire walled its borders with Pakistan and further efforts can be made to make them infiltration proof. To the south is the Arabian

Sea where the United States navy and the Indian navy can jointly work together to prevent the Islamists from breaking out. The air space - if at all it becomes a threat - can be blocked by enforcing a no-fly zone, and in any case any aircraft that takes off from the AfPak region can be monitored and tracked down to wherever it lands.

The only other possible outlet will be the People's Republic of China (PRC), which will face for the first time the dilemma of containing the Islamists on the one hand and continuing its 'all weather friendship' with Pakistan. It is therefore high time that the United States stops the Chinese from getting a free ride in Pakistan, with the US paying for the war against terror and the Chinese seemingly getting all the kudos and business. The United States should let the Chinese put their money where their mouth is and foot the bill for keeping Pakistan afloat - perhaps an ideal way to prove that their friendship with Pakistan is 'deeper than the seas and higher than the mountains'.

Some salient issues may require deeper examination.

- First, building a firewall around AfPak does not mean abandoning the region to the Islamists. All that it means is that the Americans will fight the Islamists indirectly by strongly backing all those forces that want to resist the Taliban in both Afghanistan and Pakistan. The US military presence in the region could be limited to providing training, money, weapons and intelligence to the anti-Taliban forces. This may reduce the US footprint but not necessarily its strategic influence in the region.

- Second, and equally important, is the fact that instead of the \$40 to 50 billion that the partition plan entails, the firewall plan could be put in place at a fraction of the current cost. Finally, the firewall plan has the potential of generating a far wider consensus among the international and regional stakeholders and building probably a more robust regional security alliance in which the burden of the United States will be shared substantially and responsibly since everyone will have a vital stake in keeping the Taliban at bay.

- And third, the only component of the partition plan that will also come into play in the firewall plan is the targeting of Taliban concentrations and safe havens through manned and unmanned strikes. The use of air power (and in some cases Special Forces) against Taliban targets that will be more visible if they have to administer the territory under their control will turn the dynamics of the Afghan war on its head. In other words, instead of the US troops fighting a set-piece battle against the Taliban, it will be the Taliban who will be cornered into positions with the United States undertaking a counter insurgent shock and awe campaign albeit from the third dimension.

The one big advantage of the regional firewall strategy which will follow the withdrawal of US troops in the region will be that it will free the US from its dependence on Pakistan and put an end to the Pakistani game of 'looking both ways' on the issue of terror groups. With Pakistan losing its main leverage - the logistics supply lines that run through its

territory – the US will be in a far better position to dictate terms to the Pakistanis to come clean on their internal mess. The choice before Pakistan will be simple and straight: either end the double game and exterminate the terror militias that it has been promoting and protecting or else pay the price for this malignant policy.

Of course, there may be some concern regarding the security and safety of Pakistan's nuclear weapons and therefore the United States may continue with the kid glove approach towards Pakistan. But this is yet another urban myth simply because, unless Pakistan has decided to commit *harakiri* there is no question of it indulging in nuclear sabre-rattling or brinkmanship in view of its larger self-interest, even less so with a super power like the US.

Looking Ahead

In a recent interview to the *Rolling Stone* magazine, President Obama argued that the US presence in Afghanistan is required for the sake of stability in Pakistan and India. The point here is that the West should not be overly worried about the export of terror to India, as the country has learnt to firewall itself quite well over the years. While these measures may not have been foolproof, they have delivered reasonable security against wanton acts of terror. It is therefore time that regional stakeholders other than Pakistan and Afghanistan joined hands with the United States and brace themselves for the impending troop withdrawal and work together towards building an effective firewall. Such an approach would not only free the United States from aimlessly paying for Pakistan's follies and haemorrhaging its own economy and military, but also drive its rival China to act more responsibly in the global fight against terrorism.

Such a situation would, for once, call the ultimate Pakistani bluff of double timing the Americans in the name of the global war against terror – as also its more than half a century old search for strategic depth in Afghanistan. Far from abandoning the liberal, progressive and moderate forces of Afghanistan to the depredations of the Taliban, the firewall strategy seeks to strengthen its genuine struggle against the foreign sponsored terrorist groups.

If even remotely successful, this approach would give a boost to the emergence of a vibrant and prosperous Afghanistan which is at peace with itself and with its neighbours.