



## 2011 and beyond: Visualising Af-Pak

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### *Summary*

Getting the hard core Taliban to concede the fight without loss of face is preferable to destroying them. The latter course is rendered risky by the linkages between the Afghan Taliban, Pakistani Taliban and Punjabi Taliban and their penetration of the Pakistani state and society.

Barack Obama in his speech to West Point cadets has indicated that Western troops would begin exiting Afghanistan by July 2011. This date has come in for considerable criticism, much of it misinterpreting it as one by which the United States would have substantially exited Afghanistan. The more accurate understanding of the deadline is that it is the beginning of the military withdrawal from Afghanistan. Clearly, the exit of Western troops, in particular that of the United States, could be an extended affair. In Iraq, for instance, the phased withdrawal has been spread over three years. Likewise, in Afghanistan, it would be predicated on the prevailing conditions and particularly the ability of the Afghan security forces to cope with the insurgency. Obama noted that the United States would continue to 'assist' Afghan security forces. Therefore, with the fighting outsourced to the Afghans, the United States could progressively disengage and withdraw.

Obama has accepted that his deadline is meant to concentrate minds and direct efforts. Specifically, it would bring a sense of urgency to training the Afghan military and improving the quality of governance. The 'surge' is to militarily tame the Taliban, while action on these two fronts proceeds at high tempo. The specification of a date provides a reason for Europeans to hang in and also has implications for Obama's re-election prospects.

Visualising how the conflict will play out till 2011 would best indicate whether the setting of a date was a good idea. Critics have it that the Taliban would simply wait out the Americans in keeping with their refrain, 'You have the watches; we have the time!' Their Pakistani minders would be less amenable to American pressure to 'go after' the Taliban, hoping to use them for their own strategic purposes later. Expecting to create a turnaround in the situation as was done in Iraq's Anbar province through the Awakening campaign is to fix a template on to a problem of larger and more varied dimensions.

Ironically, Obama can only silence his critics by taking their critique seriously. Doing so would help arrive at solutions to the problems his critics anticipate. For instance, if it is not possible to make a viable fighting force out of the ANA in a short period of one and half years, then what is 'Plan B'?

Two answers suggest themselves. One is to involve the neighbours who are fearful of a Taliban return to strengthen the present dispensation in Kabul, both during the transition and in a post-NATO environment. For instance, India could participate more directly and with full throttle in the training and governance aspects. Presently, it has a muted profile in training the ANA and civil service officers at its institutions in India. Its contribution of US \$1.2 billion for developmental projects is better known. This engagement can widen and deepen with military training teams on the ground. The issue of trainers in commando operations in Afghanistan reportedly came up during the visit of the chief of US Pacific Command, Admiral Willard, to India recently. The advantage for the United States of having India in the background is that it places additional pressure on Pakistan and presents the Taliban with the unmistakable message that it will not be allowed to win.

The second is in an expansion of the scope of American engagement with the Taliban. Pakistan has accepted that it can exercise its influence with the Taliban in favour of a negotiated

end to the conflict. Saudi Arabia has also brokered talks with the Taliban. The British have talked to Taliban commanders at the tactical level. This engagement has been so far for the limited purpose of breaking the cohesion of the Taliban by separating the 'moderate' from the 'bad' Taliban. It has greater potential for success now that Obama has set a date for the departure of foreign troops – the 'nationalist' grievance of many Taliban fighters. The possibility of their departure will increase with results yielded by this political effort in conjunction with the surge. The ANA, along with the warlords and the converted Taliban, would be able to handle the 'hard core' Taliban.

The problem with both options is that they envisage continuing conflict, amounting to an externally supported civil war post-2011. In case Pakistan and India end up backing their respective proxies, no peace would result, even if the Taliban would be kept away from power. In the second case, the result would be an Afghanisation of the conflict with a rump Taliban, most likely supported by Pakistan, continuing to challenge the state. This may be acceptable for the United States, since it basically wants to ensure that global terrorism does not acquire a presence there once again. However, it is not in the best interests of the Afghan people or of the region since the Afghans would continue to fight against each other and the regional powers would end up supporting their respective proxies.

What alternatively should be done? Getting the hard core Taliban to concede the fight without loss of face is preferable to destroying them. The latter is rendered risky by the linkages between the Afghan Taliban, Pakistani Taliban and Punjabi Taliban and their penetration of the Pakistani state and society. While Pakistan may prove capable eventually of rolling back the Taliban, there are uncertainties in this regard. What is certain however is the expansion of instability in Pakistan. Bringing the hard core Taliban over-ground is therefore the strategic problem.

The first move has already been made in a date being announced by Obama. He has further indicated that he would back any initiative of Karzai to negotiate. Thus, in principle, the Americans are not averse to a political settlement. The manner this is brought about should not result in triumphalism, and thus a tendency to expansionism, by the Taliban. This would require diplomatic skills, time and military pressure generated by the 'surge'. To ensure an outcome that is visible by the end of 2010, engagement of the hard core Taliban needs to begin early and in earnest. It would obviate the feared expansion of the conflict. The problem with waiting to forge a connection with the Taliban lies in violence acquiring a momentum of its own, particularly within Pakistan.

Thus, a preliminary understanding needs to be arrived at first. The Taliban would have to dissolve their ties with al Qaeda, which is the basic US demand. Suitable sweeteners by Saudi Arabia can enable that effort. Pakistan would be required to guarantee the Taliban's good behaviour. At the same time, Pakistan would have to concede to India's demand for discontinuing the proxy war in order to generate additional space within Afghanistan for its Taliban proxy. Afghanistan's neutrality would need to be under-written by all regional players. The international community, with the United States, Europe, China and India in the lead, could concentrate on reconstruction. A regional conference engaging with what

Pakistan refers to as a 'grand bargain' could subsequently ink a deal along these lines. The role of the UN and the regional organisation, SAARC, could be built into this deal to help soften the otherwise prickly inter-state interface.

For such a convergence of minds, the idea that the hard core Taliban can be engaged with needs to be accepted. Admittedly the prospects are not bright, given that since the Obama speech Petraeus has required Pakistan to continue its military actions. Obama has also said that given hard intelligence, strikes would not spare Pakistani territory. Reports have it that Pakistan has rebuffed US pressure to go after the Haqqani faction of the Afghan Taliban. On the Taliban side, the escalation in violence mounted by the Pakistani Taliban in Pakistan underscores their truculent mood, reflecting their dismissal earlier of Obama's speech. This is set to expand, given reports of the Pakistan Army readying to chase the Pakistani Taliban which had fled South Waziristan into Orakzai and elsewhere.

However, if the conflict is to wind-down by 2011 to enable the departure of Western troops, there is no other alternative but to get the Taliban on board. While prospects for progress exist, there are lurking dangers in neglecting this alternative. The al Qaeda is not an over-weening threat any more. Its continuing influence over the Taliban is dependent on their being on the same side in the conflict. The Taliban cannot recapture power since regional players would not allow it to, even if the United States were to leave. A time frame has been set on Western departure, meeting the Taliban's demand. The prospects of enlargement in scope and area of violence in Pakistan, to include the port city Karachi, are daunting. Getting only a portion of the Taliban on board would not end the conflict, but instead threatens to expand it. An end to the violence in Afghanistan is in the interest of the Afghans, whose interests all neighbours, including India and Pakistan, claim to be supporting. In case factional conflict supported by any of the neighbours continues, the conflict would simmer and eventually expand to affect other dimensions of inter-state relations. Therefore, re-thinking the stand against engaging the hard core Taliban is in order.

What does this mean for India? It involves a policy reorientation in terms of India reaching out to the Taliban and curtailing the current policy of containing Pakistan in Afghanistan. Though seemingly a difficult proposition, in principle policies are amenable to adjustment depending on what suits the national interest in a given circumstance. In case Pakistan is willing to concede Indian demands in terms of discontinuing the proxy war, then India need not be averse to a negotiated accommodation of the Taliban in the power structure in Kabul. This enabling approach of India would help forge ties afresh with the Taliban. Its soft power and economic attraction can bring the Taliban to see the advantages of continued association. Having Pukhtun friends across Pakistan's Punjabi heartland is in keeping with the tenets of Chanakya's 'Mandala' philosophy.

The time is ripe for India to play a constructive role. Presently, it has invested considerably in Afghanistan. It has restricted Pakistan's pursuit of 'strategic depth'. India is in a position to protect these gains through its continued support for the Karzai regime along with the West and other regional players. However, an unstable Pakistan on its borders and pursuit

of a war by proxy in Afghanistan is not in India's interest. Pakistan has many advantages in playing the role of a spoiler. It could expand the proxy war in Afghanistan or re-ignite trouble in Kashmir, leading to regional instability. Thus, the current juncture is opportune for switching to a proactive regional role.

Will Pakistan bite? Firstly, it is aware that Indian and US concurrence would be required for reinserting the Taliban in Kabul's power equations. Therefore, negotiations hold promise. Secondly, it is beset with internal problems and is wary of giving jihadist forces any more space, particularly since their action could provoke India beyond a point of no return. Although it is not in a position to act against these forces, it can cease looking at them as strategic assets if the inducement is right. A Kashmir on the mend and greater play in Afghanistan are adequate sweeteners. Thirdly, it has exhibited restraint in Kashmir of late. It is watching the positive developments on the Indian side of Kashmir involving the revival of a dialogue between India and the separatists and the reported pull out of some military and paramilitary forces. This makes Kashmir recede further from Pakistan's radar screen. Lastly, state survival is predicated on an introspective agenda of economic development and social progress. Pakistan is poised on the brink of civil war along ethnic and ideological lines. The military can be expected to make the necessary policy changes that would over the long term help remove the tag of a 'failing state'.

India could exercise its credentials as a regional power in bringing about a change in the Af-Pak zone. Such an initiative would bail out its strategic partner, the United States, and has the potential to transform its relationship with Pakistan. India needs to test the waters, perhaps through a sounding out of Pakistani reaction. In case the response from Pakistan is positive, preliminary talks can be held away from the media glare. India's Special Envoy has already been designated. His agenda could be expanded to include exploring the desirability, feasibility and measures for practicability of the recommendation here.

The dominant and presently official position is anti-Taliban. Approaching the Taliban differently would require management of public perception. This would be difficult in the face of counter arguments originating in the dominant discourse and in entrenched institutional positions. The major one would be that the Taliban would pose the threat of spread of fundamentalism by lending itself as a harbour for international terrorism once again. Since their accession to a share of power is to be in a negotiated manner, details of guarantee, verification and monitoring can be part of the negotiations. In so far as being the fount of fundamentalism once again, the argument presupposes an inherent weakness in South Asian and Central Asian Islam. This is a debatable proposition with respect to India and as it reflects little understanding of the self-interest and existential preoccupations of India's minority.

In so far as Kashmir is concerned, the Taliban connection is firstly an exaggeration, existing at best at a tactical level. The Punjabi Taliban are the chief threat. Their base of operations can only expand in case of Pakistani instability. The argument that an unstable Pakistan is in Indian interest fails on this count. Pakistan has exhibited some appreciation of its own

predicament and has restrained itself of late. Recognising this, India can, as part of a resumed composite dialogue, subsequently take up the Kashmir issue at the advanced stage at which it was left off by the back channel in 2007. With the internal initiatives of the Home Ministry bearing fruition, Pakistan can be brought to endorse the fresh position. This should be part of the *quid pro quo* that witnesses India permitting greater political space to Pakistan to its north.

This possibility of enlightened Indian self-interest has been pointed out discreetly by the United States. It has found little traction in India, for fear that a change in the Indian stance could be seen domestically as occurring at US behest. But this is not something that should hold up action. The argument that India can handle what a weakened Pakistan can throw at Indian interests in Afghanistan, if necessary by putting 'boots on the ground', is perhaps true. The shrillness of Pakistani protestations can testify to India's diplomatic and intelligence reach. The danger lies in increasing stakes over time being built in and increasing commitment to defend and further these. A visualization of Af-Pak in 2011 and beyond indicates that this is indeed avoidable. As a first step an internal debate needs to be initiated as to where India's interests lie in the wake of Obama outlining the end game in Af-Pak.