

Transition in Afghanistan: Future Scenarios

CLAWS RESEARCH TEAM

Situated at the crossroads of Central Asia, Afghanistan has suffered from violent invasions since ancient times by the Greeks, Arabs, Persians, Huns, Turks and Mongols. Ahmad Shah Durrani succeeded in unifying the Pashtun tribes as a nation in 1747, but Afghanistan was targeted by the British and Russian Empires in the 19th century before it gained independence from British control over its foreign affairs. However, the country has lacked a central government capable of controlling the entire geographical territory, leading to divisions on religious, regional, linguistic and ethnic lines. The overthrow of the Taliban rule in 2001 by the US and North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) forces was followed by the Bonn Agreement that returned democracy to the country. The new Afghan Constitution, which was approved by a Constitutional Loya Jirga in January 2004, established a democratic regime and provided for the separation of powers under a presidential system, with a strong executive, a bicameral legislature, and a judiciary. As Hamid Karzai was elected the first President of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan during nationwide elections held in October 2004, the new Constitution declared, “No law shall contravene the tenets and provisions of the holy religion of Islam.” Article seven of the new Constitution also declares that the Afghan state should “abide by the UN Charter, international treaties, international conventions that Afghanistan has signed, and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.”

Current Scenario and Factors Affecting Transition

The domestic political landscape remains polarised between Karzai's government forces and the Western allies on one side versus the Taliban, Hizb-e-Islami (Hikmatyar) and Haqqani network on the other. The warlords were disarmed only superficially under the DDR process and dominate prominent positions in the judiciary, bureaucracy and the factional-alliance security forces [Afghan National Army and Afghan National Police (ANA and ANP)]. There are linkages between the warlords and the Taliban. There has been sanctioning of US aid, new business empires have come up after the return of the diaspora but widespread corruption also continues.

The Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) are now better equipped to fight the Taliban and the response of commando units against terror modules has been good; they can retain control of city centres. But the composition remains ethnically unbalanced. The officer class has more Tajiks; Pashtuns are being brought in but integration is slow. Desertions and seasonal attrition rates remain very high. Logistic capabilities remain dependent on the West. The Afghan local police, a force of about 23,550, is corrupt and not popular in the rural areas. The personnel are believed to have indulged in human rights violations.

The Taliban have demanded the release of about 20 Guantanamo Bay prisoners, including Mullah Khairkhowa; release of prisoners inside Afghanistan (Bagram); removal of UN sanctions; acceptance as a political movement; a comprehensive guarantee of a substantive role in governance; acknowledgement of the *Sharia* dilution of the Constitution; purge of the existing ANA/ANP, altering the ethnic composition of the ANSF, and maintaining their own mobilised armed personnel in some amalgamation. The Taliban approach village elders and local clerics with a mix of ideological persuasion, monetary inducements and intimidation. They offer efficient, quick and non-partisan judicial mechanisms, including mobile courts for justice. They have also opened ranks to non-Pashtuns in the north and northeast. Evidence of continuing factionalism among the Taliban also persists.

For the purposes of reconciliation/reintegration, preliminary contacts were made at several levels, including direct Afghan-to-Afghan talks through the Karzai Administration. The problems and pitfalls that remain pertain to the question of the talks being between, and with, whom. It also remains to be seen whether the Haqqanis will act as bridge for the Afghan Taliban and the cumulative impact on the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP).

Impact, Potential and Opportunities of the Political Transition

The presidential and provincial elections have been a watershed as far as Afghanistan is concerned. There has been relative peace in the last decade but cynics point out that the situation may turn dire post-withdrawal of US forces. All these predictions have to a significant extent been laid to rest and in that context, the presidential elections have been a milestone. The elections have been organised in a transparent, relatively free and fair manner. They mobilised millions of voters, re-legitimised the constitutional order, witnessed the eviction of the Taliban and renewed critical confidence in the ANSF. Six million votes were cast which is a strong mandate for democratic governance and anti-insurgency.

The Taliban have been trying to derail the election process. Their website claims that taking part in elections is “anti-state” and “anti-Islam” and the participants are “Western slaves” and puppets. The thrust of the Taliban was in portraying that democracy is not compatible with Islam as it would push out the *Sharia* and lead to emancipation of women. Post-elections, the thrust has changed as the population did not support the Taliban view. Now, the Taliban say that elections cannot produce a legitimate leadership as Afghanistan is under occupation; they are moving away from attacking democracy *per se* to attacking democracy as it is being practised at present in Afghanistan.

Genuine concerns have been raised over conducting a second round of elections. There is fear of the Taliban interfering which could lead to loss of lives of the common citizens, security personnel and election staff. Also, there is a fear that the second round could be divisive. However, the other belief is that a second round is absolutely imperative. The Taliban have lost legitimacy and a successful second round will further add to the credibility of the new government that will need a strong mandate to take on the challenges that confront the country as it moves forward: economic, national security, narcotics cultivation and export, providing employment to the youth, amongst other things.

Future Scenarios: Probability and Prognosis

Option A (Best-Case Scenario for Pakistan): Maximise Taliban influence in a weak Kabul government in the initial phase of transition and curtail infighting. The advantages are that it provides strategic depth, safe havens for extremists and

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reduces/excludes Indian influence. However, it could lead to a resurgence of Pashtun nationalism and act as an outlet for disgruntled factions. Also, it could lead to greater independence of Afghan-Taliban factions from Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) control. Link-ups with the TTP could lead to strategic depth in reverse.

Implications for India: Fanning of Kashmir-centric terrorism is possible but unlikely.

Option B: Inclusive power sharing with all ethnic groups/power-brokers. It is possible but not likely, given the mutual distrust. This could facilitate government formation with US help and could bring in Pashtuns [pro-Taliban, Hizb-e-Islami (HeI), and others including pro-Karzai], Tajiks, Uzbeks, Hazaras and other warlords. However, it could lead to an uneasy stability and be a precursor to civil strife.

Implications for India: India has been supporting, promoting and financing large infrastructure projects through humanitarian assistance, capacity building and also focussing on smaller projects. Leverage remains with the ethnic groups but constant competition for maintaining influence does not augur well for stability.

Option C (Worst-Case Scenario): Intensifying civil strife between ethnic power brokers, leading to civil war. It will lead to intensification of factional splits among the Pashtuns (Taliban, Hizb-e-Islami, pro-Karzai elements, Haqqani network). There would be a spillover impact on the TTP and it could lead to a strategic depth in reverse. Tajik factions could take sides and regional players such as Iran, Russia and others could reenter the fray.

Implications for India: Not good for India as capacity to woo power brokers would become dependent on relations with, and the role of, other regional actors.

Indian Concerns and Options

The transition in Afghanistan is primarily taking place in three domains: political, security, and economic and development. All three areas are concerns for India. India would very much like to continue economic engagement with Afghanistan and ensure that Afghanistan is integrated with the South Asian economy such that it then becomes a bridge for South Asia and Central Asia. Concerns for protecting India's investments and presence in Afghanistan and pursuing India's aspirations to connect with Central Asia and play a larger role in South Asia will all depend on the state of Afghanistan.

While the Taliban appear determined to take control of Afghanistan, India would not want that to happen. On the one hand, there is gradual escalation of violence and an erosion of financial resources in Afghanistan. In some rural areas, locals are standing up against the Afghan forces, resulting in minor clashes. The security structure which India wants to sustain to ensure stability, however, remains a matter of serious concern. If the Taliban get into a dominant position, not only would investments and stakes face severe trouble but in that situation, Pakistan, in order to continue playing an increasing role, may activate groups on the Kashmir front as it would not like India to be supportive of the Afghan security forces.

The recent elections have demonstrated that Afghanistan is not the same as it was in the 1990s or early 2000s. Pakistan wants to ensure its strategic depth when it comes to Afghanistan and, thus, desires an important role and influence in Kabul as far as decision-making and government formation is concerned. It desires to safeguard its own interest and deny any role to India. In this context, it uses the Taliban as an instrument of its own foreign policy. However, even the Taliban of today are different, and it is doubtful whether Pakistan will be able to control them as it was able to do in the 1990s. Pakistan suffers from a huge drawback in terms of activity and presence of the TTP in the northwestern region of the country. After the withdrawal of the forces, possibly the greatest beneficiary could be the TTP as it might be able to establish a set of linkages with the Afghan-Taliban and move freely across the border. Pakistan continues to be an important player but its credibility in Afghanistan is extremely low. It is seen as a promoter of insurgency and militancy, and of harbouring terrorist attacks in Afghanistan.

It is time to reach out to Pakistan and bridge the huge trust deficit that exists between the two countries. Many international commentators have said that the real war in Afghanistan in the coming decade would not be a Shia-Sunni war but an India-Pakistan cold war. India has time and again reiterated that it wants an independent and sovereign Afghanistan which is stable and peaceful which would require a strong, secular and moderate authority in Kabul.

India's Options

- Continue political and diplomatic engagement with whoever comes to power.
- Continue economic aid and explore back-up options.
- Reengage old friends within Afghanistan – revive ethnic card. Find new Pashtun friends.

- Establish commonality of security interests with other regional players – Russia, Iran.
- Explore regional security umbrellas – Turkey, the United Nations.
- Continue training and military aid on the request of the new Afghan government in a regulated manner, but with no boots on the ground.

India's options can be categorised at three levels:

At the international level, India would want a continuing engagement of the international community (the US and NATO), in terms of both military presence and continued financial assistance. There is a lurking fear that if the Taliban dominate Afghanistan, the fear of anti-West terror in one form or the other would continue. This reason itself will push the West to continue to engage with Afghanistan. India would also want the Bilateral Security Agreement (BSA) to be concluded as it can provide a legitimate structure for the continued commitment of the international community.

Another option is the international community accepting Afghanistan as a neutral country or it being brought under UN peace-keeping, though this remains possibly unviable. This option may not be pleasing to India but could be accepted to ensure that Pakistan does not dominate.

Regionally, the continuing concern is that the Central Asian countries must ensure that the Taliban do not get sanctuaries in neighbouring countries, including Pakistan. However, it is doubtful if Pakistan, even after giving a commitment, would actually follow this through.

From India's perspective, the key countries involved are Pakistan, Iran, China, and Russia. Pakistan is not very confident of controlling the Taliban, who also want to get out from under the Pakistani umbrella. India had been sounding Russia to work together on Afghanistan for the last four years but Russia was not keen. However, it is now willing to provide heavy equipment like helicopters, tanks, etc. through Indian financing. There are obvious constraints and limitations in this option. Similarly, there are constraints in working with Iran. China has equal stakes in Afghanistan and India needs to persuade China to work together with it on Afghanistan. For China, the situation in Xinjiang is far more critical and it would not like to be wholly dependent on Pakistan. The Chinese, however, have to be persuaded to give greater financial commitment for Afghanistan's stability.

Besides these bilateral options, the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) is another option; though possibly the weakest and most fragile. India is trying to lure Pakistan economically, catering to a constituency that wants to flourish economically and integrate with the South Asian and Central Asian

markets. This would only be possible by linking trade and investment channels. This is entirely an internal matter and depends on whether such constituency will have any influence over the more dominant Army.

Internationally, there is a sense of fatigue as far as Afghanistan is concerned, whether it is the United States or other allied powers that have been providing either security or financial support to the country over the last 12 years. There is a sense that the time is ripe to move out as nothing more can be done. In that context, it is all the more imperative for the regional countries to step up and assume more responsibility. There is a huge potential as far as Afghanistan is concerned as it can serve as a land bridge of connectivity among Central Asia, South Asia and West Asia. If peace is restored in the country, there is great possibility and potential that transportation and transport networks can be put in place which can serve as an energy corridor and also enhance free flow of people and ideas. So far, India has had a very nuanced and balanced policy but a clear statement of intent in building up the security forces, which is a prerequisite to any economic and political transition, could dictate the future to a very large extent.

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Central Asian Concerns

Two aspects are important for the Central Asian countries: first, is the possibility of a rise in extremism and fundamentalism after the withdrawal of the US and NATO forces if terrorist and fundamentalist forces move up north. This would give an impetus to several of the dormant local terrorist organisations like the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, which could be reenergised to create problems and carry out attacks in these Central Asian states.

The second issue that has not received significant attention is the issue of water. The Amu Darya, one of the largest rivers of Central Asia, starts from Afghanistan and is fed by melting snow, glaciers and rivers from Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Afghanistan. At present, Afghanistan which is really the water head of the Amu Darya is getting minimal flow and supply of water for irrigation. As we move forward and peace is restored, the demand for water will increase and will pose its own challenges, being a finite resource.

There are other actors like Turkey, which has been proactive and has started a trilateral effort with Afghanistan and Pakistan. The Central Asian countries are looking forward to how they can engage themselves but the challenge will be to act collectively rather than vying for their own interest.

Conclusion

Democracy in Afghanistan has been a distant dream as the country has suffered from centuries of invasions and foreign rule. The Taliban continued the tradition of suppressing government rule before the US-led war in 2001 brought back hopes of returning democracy, as has been evident in the recent elections. The second round run-off between Abdullah Abdullah and Ashraf Ghani is pivotal as the President-elect will have to look into stability, education and infrastructure post-withdrawal of the US and NATO troops. Afghanistan has gone through the process of modernisation in the last 12 years and it is time for the country to stand on its own. But it will require support from the international community in terms of finances, infrastructure and socio- economic development to realise the dream of a stable nation and a peaceful region.

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