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The Afghanistan Stalemate : Status Quo Still



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Though there is euphoria in both Afghanistan and New Delhi on the recent South Asia Policy released by the US President, followed by the recent high profile visits of US officials, there doesn't seem to be much going on to change things on the ground. If anything, the stalemate may be strengthening further.

James Mattis had earlier said before the Senate Armed Services Committee in June 2017 that the US was not winning the war in Afghanistan.¹ Gen. John W. Nicholson Jr. who has, in any case, been calling the Afghanistan situation a stalemate, claimed that a "few thousand" more troops are needed simply to maintain "a stalemate"² and that is exactly what he has got.

In fact, the former North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) Ambassador, Douglas Lute, also said in an interview recently (after President Trump's policy announcement): "If our goal is a stalemate, we've achieved it"³.

Recently, NATO Secretary-General, Jens Stoltenberg also declared that NATO would increase its troops in Afghanistan by 3,000 to help the Afghans break the stalemate.⁴ Can this

Key Points

1. The recent announcement by the US President of the South Asia Policy and the actions thereafter of the US and NATO have given a sense of the stalemate being broken soon, but the stalemate is as strong as ever and likely to tighten further.
2. The stalemate is continuing because all the parties concerned are playing not to lose; their actions contradict each other, thus, nullifying any forward progress.
3. Pakistan is definitely playing a central role in the stalemate with the Taliban-Pakistan nexus being the driving line of the negative part of the stalemate, with support from Russia and China.
4. To break the stalemate, time will be required but more importantly, a focussed overall strategy is required in which all the affected players are in sync, while keeping the democratically elected Afghan government firmly in the saddle for policy making. The success of the democratic process is a necessity for breaking the stalemate, along with other actions.
5. Building up the Afghan Army, an Afghan owned peace process, long-term developmental work by the international community, backdoor channels of diplomacy with the Taliban, internal reforms and fighting corruption are important issues for moving forward.
6. The US' push for India's role in Afghanistan is something that Pakistan may see as a red-line, thus, ensuring that the Afghan Taliban don't come to the negotiating table.
7. *An India-Pak dialogue on Afghanistan is an option to bring the important stakeholders together for the first time and open a path towards breaking the stalemate.*

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small increase really help in breaking the stalemate? In any case, these troops are not going into combat and as per the US Commanders, this still falls short of commitments.⁵

Issues Governing the Stalemate

- **The US and NATO Forces**

The US and NATO forces are presently involved in Al Qaeda and the Islamic State Khorasan (IS-K) hunting while giving Train, Advise and Assist (TAA) support to Afghanistan's troops for their war against the Taliban. Their presence in the country for so long has not been able to eradicate the Al Qaeda or IS-K, and the building up of the Afghan National Security Force (ANSF) will take time. The extra US troops sanctioned actually mean very little on the ground as many troops were already operating there. These figures have only legitimised their presence. The NATO troops also don't increase the combat potential, as mentioned above.

The Obama surge was too short and came with an 'expiry' date, thus, giving the Taliban a clear signal to wait out the time till the drawdown, and they did so, swinging the stalemate back in their favour now.

In addition, the US dealt with Afghanistan as a rentier state, leaving almost no space for local input in the reconstruction process.⁶ Consequently, the development did not proceed with a long-term view or keeping the requirements of the government in view, thus, not helping in resolving the stalemate.

- **The Afghan Government and ANSF**

The National Unity Government (NUG) of Afghanistan is still not in control even though it is in its last year of governance. It is plagued by internal divisions and corruption in a country that does not have the transportation or communications for a centralised rule. It is battling a weak economy due to lack of development and trade hurdles; tourism has been badly affected due to the terrorist actions. It has to battle the Taliban and other terrorist

groups while continuing to build up its forces. The ANSF itself is still finding its feet, lacking good leadership, is short of the required strength and is facing a number of direct attacks by the various terrorist groups.

The NUG cannot survive without heavy international financial support. Its corruption is crippling it and draining the capabilities of the country's security forces and also acting as a powerful recruiting tool for the Taliban.⁷ In particular, the corruption of the Afghan courts enables the Taliban to settle disputes in the rural areas with their draconian but uncorrupt *Sharia* courts.

The Afghan political elites have not understood the importance of promoting democratic norms, and have yet to improve on their own past shortcomings.⁸ The disarray in policy coordination and implementation among various government entities of the NUG, the internal divisions over the appointments of various people, and the continuing factional politics have led Afghanistan into the stalemate.

The ANSF is not able to win decisively against insurgents in key places or contested ground, with only its Special Forces achieving some kind of positive results. Most of the fighters have little loyalty to their officers and political leaders, thus, avoid putting their lives at risk to fight the Taliban.⁹ Additionally, the Afghan military and police suffer heavy casualties.

The Afghan Air Force is in particular need of help. While its capabilities are expanding, Gen Nicholson himself assesses that the force is still "some years away" from being fully functional.

The Afghan police, on the other hand, carry out law enforcement with little supervision or judicial constraint.¹⁰ Where deployed in active operations against the Taliban, they suffer heavy losses, at times, to own friendly fire because of lack of proper training or drills.

- **Terrorist Groups**

According to a recent report submitted by the US

Department of Defence to Congress, “Afghanistan faces a continuing threat from as many as 20 insurgent and terrorist networks present or operating in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region, including the Taliban, the Haqqani Network, IS-K, and Al Qaeda, in what is the highest concentration of extremist and terrorist groups in the world”.¹¹ Among these, the Taliban control the maximum area, while the others have a smaller presence and area of influence. The Taliban receive funding, safe havens and sanctuary, along with important intelligence, from Pakistan. In addition, they control the key poppy growing province of Helmand, deriving almost an estimated \$ 3 billion from the opium trade.¹² All these terrorist groups are slowly eroding the government support and undermining the security forces by attacking the government as well as the security forces.

There is no consensus among the various terrorist organisations and no likelihood of any meaningful breakthrough. It is only the Taliban who, if brought to the negotiating table, have a real chance of reducing the stalemate considerably. In actuality, the goal of destroying the Taliban can never be realistic as the Taliban’s aspirations are shared by many in the male-dominated Pashtun society in which the Taliban live. Almost every male Pashtun has a relative who is either currently in the organisation or who has died fighting the Americans and the friends of the Americans.¹³ Tribal and family loyalty count in Afghanistan immensely – to look at destroying the Taliban to achieve peace is unrealistic. However, that means getting the US out of Afghanistan which was a primary condition of the Taliban till recently. There seems to be a change in this thought process now, which needs to be harnessed. Abdul Hakim Mujahed, an erstwhile Taliban figure and now part of the ‘Moderate Taliban’, echoed these sentiments recently and this brings hope that the Taliban may be becoming pragmatic, as the US is not leaving in a hurry.¹⁴

Other terrorist organisations (primarily Al Qaeda and IS-K) have to be dealt with ruthlessly and wiped out, to resolve the stalemate positively.

- **Pakistan**

Pakistan’s hold on the Taliban affects Afghanistan directly and allows Pakistan to make pacts with Russia and China to garner further support for itself. Its aim is to achieve strategic depth for itself, ensuring its control in its backyard by either continuing the instability or by having a big chunk of the pie in case the Taliban join the peace process and become part of the government.

Pakistan’s sanctuary and support for, and employment of, the Taliban, the Haqqani network, and other insurgent forces remain undiminished and definitely comprise a strategic impediment to ending the war.¹⁵ External support is usually the surest indicator of whether an insurgency will succeed and the Taliban continue to enjoy safe havens in Pakistan, making it all but impossible to eradicate them.¹⁶ The recent US pressure has not yet led Pakistan to rethink this policy.

Pakistan may lean more towards China if pushed by the US on this issue. In addition, as the Trump Administration has invited India to play a larger role, Pakistan may consider it highly antagonistic.

- **China**

China turns a blind eye to all the actions of Pakistan and has also sided with Russia in its recent actions, which has made matters more murky. Its aim is primarily to ensure the security of the Xinjiang Region and its One Belt One Road (OBOR) initiative. Its entry into various peace processes is only to give Pakistan an extra vote. In addition, China has secretly befriended the Taliban to keep its own interests safe.

- **Russia**

Russia’s entry into the stalemate is entirely based on undermining or negating the US presence and preventing the Taliban or any other extremist group spilling over into Russia, while gaining some kind of influence and also reducing the drug influx into Russia. It has befriended and most likely armed the Taliban, supported Pakistan and joined China, thus, strengthening the stalemate

negatively. In Gen Nicholson's words, Moscow has begun "a public effort to legitimize the Taliban that is aimed at undermining Kabul among its own citizens and warning neighbouring countries that IS-K could spill over into their nations as it did in the Levant".¹⁷

- **International Groups and Financial Aid**

The NATO toes the US line, with most of its troops in Afghanistan acting as 'informers' on the emerging situation for their respective countries. Even the increase in strength, as mentioned earlier, won't do much to change the status quo. The UN is defunct in Afghanistan and is only carrying out a reporting role. The international community till now has focussed on short-sighted high visibility projects to please the locals. The country's need was not acutely studied and the work has not been carried out coherently. Many countries participated in the reconstruction process, but their actions and agendas were not based on a single strategy. In addition, the billions of dollars of aid that was poured into Afghanistan lacked a proper oversight mechanism¹⁸ to determine its effectiveness and prevent the aid from flowing into the hands of a few political elites, who then used it for their own political ends.

- **Iran and India**

Iran is secretly making deals with the Taliban, much against its perceived image, and, overall, continues a 'wait and watch' policy. There is no direct Indian effect on the stalemate except improving the stabilisation levels through its training support in India and developmental work in Afghanistan; however, indirectly it affects Pakistan due to India's closeness to the Afghans and the US.

Continuation of the Stalemate

- Afghanistan has long been considered part of the great game, and all the major participants are seemingly playing not to lose.¹⁹ The present

Afghan government is unable to establish sovereignty throughout the country and is desperately trying to stay in control. The United States and its NATO partners have been looking for an exit strategy for at least a decade and have now decided to increase the troop levels again after having just had a drawdown. These additional troops will do just enough to keep the NUG and ANSF afloat.

- The Taliban keep attacking but cannot return to military power as they do not control the important areas nor are they willing to come to the negotiation table. Pakistan fears a political solution that would increase Indian influence in the region and, thus, keeps on increasing the ante negatively. Al-Qaeda and IS are also minor players but do enough to keep the pot boiling at their end. China and Russia, due to their vested interests, keep the scales even towards the stalemate.
- Due to the various countries / agencies involved in the Afghanistan imbroglio working only towards their own agendas, with their actions countering each other, the stalemate continues. There is no one in particular driving the stalemate though Pakistan does play a larger role than the others. The Taliban-Pakistan nexus is, thus, the driving line of the negative part of the stalemate with the push given to them by China, Russia and earlier by the US as well. The NUG-ANSF combine, providing the positive part, has the US-NATO combine behind it, along with whatever help India provides. The other actors all fall in the grey areas of the stalemate. The strong stance of the US against Pakistan now has the risk of making the stalemate worse in case it causes Pakistan to take drastic steps. The US is hoping Pakistan will fall in line but that is a very unlikely scenario. Pakistan, on the other hand, is also losing its hold over the Taliban whose actions are taking a momentum of their own. Individual control like Pakistan's over the Taliban or the US' over Pakistan, etc. does not seem to have any real weight when it comes to achieving a meaningful push (negative or positive) in the stalemate.

Breaking the Stalemate

- The stalemate is likely to continue for some more time. Any thoughts to the contrary would be premature. Even the recent unannounced visits by the US Defence Secretary and NATO's Secretary-General to Kabul were met with rocket attacks, attesting to the power of the Taliban and their ability to quickly carry out an attack in the heart of the Afghan capital²⁰ – there is no chance of the Taliban's power diminishing, as is claimed sometimes.
- Hence, to break the stalemate, it will require time but, more importantly, a focussed overall strategy in which all the affected players are in sync while keeping the democratically elected Afghan government firmly in the saddle for policy making. The success of the democratic process is a necessity and to ensure a rational path towards breaking the stalemate, many more steps are also needed to be taken.
- It is imperative to create security conditions in Afghanistan which encourage and facilitate a negotiated peace process and an eventual diplomatic resolution of the conflict. For this, continuing to build an effective Afghan Army remains a necessity for the residual American and NATO forces in the country. The Afghan security forces are suffering heavy casualties and lack modern equipment and air power. The US needs to boost its support to the ANSF and build its offensive capabilities by providing equipment and sustained support for expanding the ANSF's capabilities, and enhancing the leadership training levels. Investing in, and increasing, the Afghan Special Security Forces and Afghan Air Force to create offensive capacity will help assert influence over key population areas and reduce the Taliban's capacity over time.²¹
- The international community needs to forge a diplomatic regional consensus in support of long-term stabilisation of Afghanistan. For this, it needs to support an Afghan-driven, Afghan-led and Afghan-owned peace process like the Kabul Process and work in concert with the Afghan government towards improving the foundations of the state²² by focussing on long-term developmental projects. It also needs to allow Afghanistan to be free of trade hurdles as created by Pakistan via providing alternate routes like done by India and Iran via the air corridor and Chabahar port.
- On the internal front, the Afghan government must bring in reforms (socio-economic and electoral reforms being a priority) and take serious measures to combat official corruption in the government, especially in the security and judiciary sectors.²³
- The successful deal made by the Afghan government with the Hezb-i-Islami is a major breakthrough. Continuing the backdoor channel diplomacy with the Taliban and especially pressurising Pakistan to bring the Taliban to the negotiating table should go hand-in-hand with the military campaign.²⁴
- While the only country that both the US and Afghanistan think has 'influence' over the Taliban is Pakistan, a US push for India's role in Afghanistan is highly unlikely to provide Pakistan with an incentive to play a role, even that of a facilitator.²⁵ India's expected role in 'rebuilding' Afghanistan is something that Pakistan may see as a red-line, crossing which would make Pakistan potentially disinterested in using whatever 'influence' it has over the Afghan Taliban to come to the negotiating table.
- An India-Pak dialogue on Afghanistan is a viable option which could resolve the misconceptions and fears held by Pakistan. This needs to be pushed in earnest by the India-US-Afghanistan combine, with India taking the lead in initiating it. In case it materialises, at the very least, it will provide a platform for the main stakeholders to meet each other together for the first time, and if the talks are successful, it may actually show a visible path towards breaking the stalemate positively.

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