



Emerging Contours of Conflict in Afghanistan



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Afghanistan, the arena of the New Great Game by global and regional players is a strategic hub where due to conflict of interest and/or status issues certain actions/decisions are being taken which could have adverse effect on Afghanistan. An example of this is the efforts of Russia to ensure the US and NATO troops leave Afghanistan on a losing note as Russia had earlier. Afghanistan is as it is severely affected by terrorism (being fuelled by Pakistan) and also interference by Pakistan in its political and economic growth. These are likely to lead to huge repercussions for regional security and peace in the near future.

Afghanistan internally is affected by a low economic datum and fractured population with tribal loyalties having primacy. The Afghanistan National Defence Security Forces (ANDSF) are in the nascency stage with the transformation decade only being about 2 years old and are also overstretched presently after the drawdown of international troops. The country

Key Points

- Afghanistan is a strategic hub where conflict would have serious regional security implications.
- Russia is leading the Trilateral Initiative (Moscow Conferences on Afghanistan) to be the broker of peace and to prop up Taliban in the government. Both Russia and China believes that Pakistan is a part of the solution in Afghanistan and that Taliban is the lesser of two evils between the Taliban and ISKP.
- The Afghanistan internal security situation is likely to be adversely affected by Russian and Chinese actions of propping up the Taliban.
- The US-Russia rivalry in Afghanistan is increasing, and if left unchecked, could make it a new theatre of conflict between them.
- A strong and united ANDSF and achieving peace with Taliban are the key to achieving future stability goals in Afghanistan.
- USA needs to work on optimal troop enhancement as also futuristic withdrawal without announcing its timelines openly.
- The India-USA-Afghanistan alliance needs to be stepped up as a viable alternative for peace deals.
- China's investments (including OBOR) are directly threatened by security and stability situation in Af-Pak Region. Chinese investments in Afghanistan would ensure China forces Pakistan to stop its actions in Afghanistan.

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also suffers from a fragile political setup, widespread corruption, and lack of much needed development which makes moving ahead that much more difficult. Lastly, Afghanistan is also a hub of drug trade which increases the hollowness and makes it attractive to those looking for controlling the trade for their own benefit.

Afghanistan, however, due to being a land bridge between the Middle East, Central Asia, and South Asia has tremendous potential to become a cross-road of trade, transport, and energy corridors. Its vast resources of mineral wealth can thus be the drivers for any cross trade benefits accruing. In order to achieve any of these, however, stability is required not only within Afghanistan but in the overall region.

Russia

Having moved out of Afghanistan in 1989, Russia is now sensing an opportunity to return with an enhanced role in the region. It is utilising the window of opportunity created by the drawdown of US troops, USA elections, and lack of clear Afghanistan future policy by USA post elections. Russia has its fears due to presence of USA and NATO bases in its underbelly and is also wary of growing USA's warmth with Uzbekistan and Tajikistan.

The Russians are as it is fearful of Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) expansion and by extension the Islamic State of Uzbekistan (IMU) and are definitely sensing that the US is not doing enough to counter the same. They also have been feeling left out in the various peace processes that were formed to resolve the Afghanistan issue with Taliban and hence decided on heading the Trilateral Initiative (Russia, China, and Pakistan) or Moscow Conferences on Afghanistan with the first meeting being held in December 2016 in Moscow. The three meetings till now (27 December 2016, 15 February 2017, and 14 April 2017) have gradually expanded the scope of participation with Afghanistan, Iran and India being included in the second one (after

dissent voices were heard after the first meeting) and the CAR countries also attending the third meeting (the US was also invited but it abstained) primarily to legitimize the process.¹ The meetings till now have worked on giving the Taliban legitimacy by asking for removal from sanctions list and an entry into Afghanistan's political setup post a peace deal. Russia is aiming to be the primary driver and host of this peace process thus gaining control over the Afghanistan Government through the proxy of the Taliban. There are also many reports of the incumbent Russian President meeting with Taliban leaders and offering them arms and financial help to support the earlier mentioned aspect.² These actions, once completed successfully, would allow Russia leverage against the US in Afghanistan, hopefully nullify the ISKP effect (through Taliban) and also stem the drug flow northwards towards Russia. The two major issues affecting Russia's actions are that it believes Pakistan is a part of the solution in Afghanistan and that Taliban is the lesser of two evils between the Taliban and ISK.

China

China, like Russia is also threatened by USA containment fears and the presence of USA in Afghanistan makes it understandingly uncomfortable. However, conversely, China also needs a stable Afghanistan for its One Belt One Road (OBOR) success so it needs a solution once USA is marginalized. OBOR is very important to China as seen by the overtures to all countries in South Asia to join (India is the only one left to join). It is additionally affected by the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM)—Uighir threat to the Xinjiang Region. Reports of the ETIM shifting base to Badakhstan have recently prompted China to start patrolling (purportedly jointly with Afghanistan) on the China-Badakhstan border.³ Unfortunately, China also feels Pakistan is the 'solution' to achieving a stable Afghanistan and the Taliban is the solution to its problem with ETIM—Uighirs and thus it is backing

the 'Russian' Trilateral Initiative. China's very strong relationship with Pakistan also means that it will work towards reducing Pakistan's India containment fears by blunting India's efforts in Afghanistan.

In a recent change in stance of its dealings with Afghanistan, China has started direct dialogue and is not communicating through Pakistan as its proxy which is a good sign but conversely it is also having secret meetings and talks with Taliban leaders which is an adverse sign. However, as far as dealings and support directly to Afghanistan is concerned, a lot of promises have been made but very few have actually converted to sustainable reality on the ground.

USA

USA's presence in Afghanistan was and is serving a very important geo-strategic need for USA and a strong base to carry out its intended actions when required. The same issue was feared by the former President of Afghanistan, Hamid Karzai when he said that USA was playing the New Great Game by using Afghanistan as a platform for its future needs. To counter the same necessary provisions were put in the Strategic Partner Agreement (2011) with USA by Afghanistan which negate putting up permanent bases by USA or for it to use the facilities of Afghanistan for actions against other countries. With the drawdown of troops the threat of such an act has reduced but has not been eliminated as required strength can still be built up in a very short time frame.

The main intent of USA though is of eliminating the ISKP and Al Qaeda presence in Afghanistan and hopefully of subduing the Taliban threat too. Its actions seem to be slower towards reducing the Taliban threat which brings to question if there actually is intent of the same? Will not a constant Taliban threat and stalemate in Afghanistan help USA maintain its presence? It is tough to imagine USA presence in Afghanistan once Taliban reaches a settlement with Afghanistan Government. Calibrating the drug trade (towards Russia), weapon sales in the region, and

energy security needs are also seen as byproducts of USA's presence in Afghanistan.

As far as USA's Afghanistan policy is concerned, it definitely endorses an Afghanistan-led and Afghanistan-owned peace process. It is also giving the required financial aid and assisting in developmental projects, but notwithstanding the remarks mentioned earlier it would need to increase the troop strength too so as to help the ANDSF reach its goals. The US-Pakistan relationship is a crucial factor in the mix and the recent waning of relations is causing Pakistan to look elsewhere for its Afghanistan game plan.

Pakistan

Pakistan looks at Afghanistan with an aim to strengthen its geo-strategic and geo-economic position. Pakistan wants a (Pak) dependent, Taliban inclusive government in Afghanistan. In addition to other advantages, it would also allow them to avoid Pashtun 'self determination' demands along with achieving its oft repeated aim of 'strategic depth'.

To achieve its aims Pakistan is forming new bonds for its interests over the region. As its bond with USA is waning it has formed a stronger one with Russia while maintaining its existing strong bond with China to achieve its aims. Pakistan always wants to check Indian influence in Afghanistan and controlling the Afghanistan government will help in the same immensely. Controlling the drug mafia due to its inherent advantages is another important issue affecting Pakistan's interests in Afghanistan.

Pakistan, though, has not yet learnt from its earlier use of religious radicalisation in Afghanistan (the effects of which it is suffering now) and it continues to move at the same pace forward. Unfortunately both Russia and China also seem to be following its lead and are not taking heed of Pakistan's lessons while joining hands with Taliban.

Iran

While Iran continues its 'wait and watch' policy



overtly as far as Afghanistan is concerned, there are conflicting reports of Iran offering Taliban ‘office space’ in Zahedan.⁴ The office is ‘officially closed’ but continues to function nevertheless. This is, of course, a clear change in Iran’s thinking towards Taliban in Afghanistan primarily due to its worry about the presence of ISKP in Afghanistan. In addition, Iran also has its fears based on the presence of US in its vicinity in Afghanistan and Taliban ‘friendship’ is a counter to the same also.

Though overall Iran wants a stable Afghanistan in its neighbourhood and wants Afghanistan to distance itself from Pakistan, however, it also seems to be following the path of ‘lesser of two evils’ as a solution by backing the Taliban. Its aims in Afghanistan include protection of the Shia minority, controlling the rise in influx of refugees, and reduction in drug trade. A stable Afghanistan may give it all the above as well as allow it to become an important export partner. The recent India-Iran-Afghanistan Transport and Transit Corridor Agreement (2017) and the Chabahar Port deal is a huge part of that plan and Iran is taking positive steps to further connectivity between itself and Afghanistan to further the same.

India

As far as India is concerned a stable Afghanistan is a strategic priority. In the words of the PM Narendra Modi, India wants a ‘United, Democratic, Sovereign, Secure and Prosperous Afghanistan’.⁵ India is very keen on having a strong Afghanistan government to allow for better governance. It is also undertaking a number of initiatives to ensure both capacity and capability empowerment of Afghanistan.

The aims of India in Afghanistan include countering Pakistan’s control and interests, reduction in terror threat, and enhancing strategic and economic connectivity. With the aim of increasing trade to USD 10 billion a year by the next 5 years, secure connectivity to Afghanistan becomes a very important issue.⁶

Factors Affecting Future of Afghanistan

The future of Afghanistan is likely to be affected by a number of external and internal factors. USA’s strategic patience and commitment including increase to an optimal strength will likely affect the immediate future credibly. Russia’s recent forays and China’s increased role definitely are further primers. A strong and united ANDSF is the key to achieving future goals definitely. Achieving peace with Taliban at the earliest will be an important catalyst in moving towards a peaceful Afghanistan.

Good governance coupled with drop in widespread corruption is required to improve the internal health. Moving away from tribal loyalties and instilling a rise in Afghan Nationalism would go a long way in binding the country together. The international financial commitment need to be in place till such time the Afghanistan economy becomes self-sustainable.

India can certainly help in building a better future for Afghanistan by helping in developmental and infrastructural projects. Giving non-military and possibly military aid (later in the future) will also help in strengthening the ANDSF. In addition using its influence with regional groups and individual regional states to conform their thinking towards the betterment of Afghanistan could also be of greater help.

Contours of Conflict

With USA recently facing marginalisation issues due to actions of Russia with China and Pakistan in tow, the reactions of USA are an important factor. The recently launched ‘MOAB’ (2017) attack against ISKP in Nangarhar was definitely a response to the recent Trilateral Initiative Meets and marginalisation attempts along with obvious reasons of destroying the tunnel complex in the Achin District of Nangarhar and sending a clear message to all terrorist groups including the Taliban. The launching of the bomb was also succeeded by visits of the US National Security Advisor and Defence Secretary to Afghanistan. In the absence of any clear future policy announcements

by Trump Administration, these visits are likely to have given indications behind closed doors of USA's future policy. The problem is that if USA presence can't bring peace, it will itself become the problem but if it carries out a complete withdrawal before ANDSF is strengthened sufficiently, it could result in collapse and work towards the benefit of the terrorist organisations. Hence, they need to tread a fine line when it comes to amount of troops in Afghanistan and optimum timelines of complete withdrawal. Also, importantly, with the US troops out of the picture, there is no incentive for the Taliban to reach any peace agreement and its bargaining position will improve tremendously along with its tactical battlefield success rates.

Russia regards Afghanistan to be in its sphere of influence and has started making its moves. Russia wants US troops out of Afghanistan as it is and feels it is not doing enough against the ISKP too thus making its case stronger. In fact the loss of USA efforts in Afghanistan may make Russia construe it as a gain for itself akin to zero sum game of the cold war era.⁷ USA refused to attend the Trilateral Meet (2017) hosted by Russia and has made open statements about states siding with Taliban being an enemy of Afghanistan and violating international law by supplying weapons to the Taliban, clearly hinting towards Russia.⁸ Russia is trying to counter the ISKP by using the Taliban and is also propping up the Taliban in the Afghanistan Government by brokering a peace deal. This push and pull between USA and Russia is slowly turning Afghanistan into the new theatre of US-Russia rivalry.⁹ Internally in Afghanistan, the impact of simultaneous political, economic and security transitions have been understandably slow thus enhancing instability. The present security situation seems to be at a stalemate where equilibrium is favouring the present fragile government. The equilibrium is positively supported by the US and ANDSF troop actions and negatively affected by Taliban, ISKP, and Pakistan's actions. The equilibrium is likely to get an additional negative push

by recent Russian (and likely Chinese) support to the Taliban and thus drop from its current state making the security situation untenable. The Op Khalid–Op Mansouri battles this summer are likely to showcase this aspect clearly. Interestingly on the positive side the Taliban-Pakistan relationship is waning and there are fissures appearing within the Taliban due to lack of a charismatic leader and a binding ideology.

Remedial Measures

Keeping in mind that multipolarity and multilateralism are the new normal, a regional solution is the key to stability in the Afghanistan Region, but it needs regional co-operation and consensus. Whether it converts into a regional force is a question only time can answer. In fact this is the only solution that allows USA to extricate itself from a losing battlefield in Afghanistan (if it wants to) and sooner or later they may push for the same.

Since Afghanistan is not very pleased with the Russian backed Trilateral Initiative and USA has not even attended the meet, the India-USA-Afghanistan alliance needs to be stepped up as a viable alternative and a primary broker for peace talks, keeping Pakistan definitely out of the loop.

Trump Administration needs to avoid publishing timelines/deadlines of its actions especially of troop withdrawals as these give clear windows and timings for the terrorist organisations and others to chalk out their plans easily and play the waiting game till required.¹⁰ There is an unavoidable need to ensure an operationally capable, professionally inclusive and sustainable ANDSF. To achieve the same US troop withdrawal presently is not recommended and definitely an increase is warranted along with equipment enhancement.

Political amalgamation of the Taliban is an unavoidable reality and the faster peace talks are concluded, the better it will be for the future of Afghanistan.

China needs to re-assess the inability of Pakistan to bring the Taliban to heel as also the continuous rise

of the ISKP affecting to its western regions. China's investments (OBOR, etc.) are directly threatened by security and stability situation in Af-Pak region; hence, the stakes for China are higher than others. The recent Belt and Road Forum held in China in 2017 showcased the importance level. If China makes Afghanistan the regional hub of communications for its Belt and Road Initiative or even if it stretches the CPEC across Afghanistan to connect it to the CAR countries, this may automatically happen.

Afghanistan needs to commit China to even more direct investments in Afghanistan to ensure China is forced to twist Pakistan into reducing its proxy actions in Afghanistan and this needs to be done before Pakistan itself loses all control on the Taliban.

India needs to work closely with USA to stabilise the Afghanistan Region. It needs to push USA to put pressure on Pakistan too because without Pakistan's indulgence the Afghanistan issue will not be resolved. It could use its erstwhile relations with Russia to restrain Russia's current/adverse actions. India also needs to de-hyphenate its policies in Afghanistan

from the Pakistan factor and look at it completely in an independent way.

Notes

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