

Afghanistan Conundrum: The Role of Regional Powers

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Abstract—Following the September 11 2001, horrific attacks on twin towers of World Trade Centre and Pentagon Towers, United States launched a comprehensive global campaign of ‘War on terror’ to bring justice to the perpetrators of this barbaric act. After refusal by Taliban to handover Osama Bin Laden, the chief architect of this attack, United States launched ‘Operation Enduring Freedom’ to dismantle Taliban and eliminate Al-Qaeda. Eighteen years down the line, war in Afghanistan has entered into a critical phase. United States is yearning for a face-saving exit from Afghanistan, the longest war in its history. In order to have a peaceful solution of endgame in Afghanistan, the role of regional powers becomes important than any time in Afghanistan’s history. The conflict that has ravaged Afghanistan over the past eighteen years is much more than a local or national power struggle and must be seen in its regional context to get a better understanding of the different dimensions of the precarious situation prevailing there. After the drawdown of Allied forces in 2014 and Afghanistan being a landlocked country, the role of regional powers especially Pakistan, China, India, Iran and Russia has increased manifold. This paper is an attempt to understand critically the role of regional powers in Afghanistan endgame.

Keywords : War on Terror, Afghanistan Conundrum, 9/11, Regional powers, Nation building, peace and stability.

Introduction

Afghanistan has an immense geo-strategic location, as it acts as a landbridge connecting China in the East, Middle East in the West, Central Asia in the North and South Asia in its South. Historically, Afghanistan, also known as ‘graveyard of empires’, has remained the focus of international powers, whether during ‘Great Game’, cold war or in the post Cold War periods.

In the post cold war period, Afghanistan became the focus of global attention after United States launched ‘Operation Enduring Freedom’, in Afghanistan following the horrific incident of 9/11. United States invaded Afghanistan in October 2001, to dismantle Taliban and eliminate Al-Qaeda, the perpetrators of 9/11. United States along with other NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organisation) countries succeeded initially in subduing Taliban and killing and apprehending large number of Al-Qaeda members, besides eliminating their base camps.ⁱ But, by 2003, United States shifted its focus from

Afghanistan to Iraq war, which resulted in the resurgence of Taliban. And, by 2014, with the drawdown of NATO forces from Afghanistan, Taliban was a formidable force to reckon with, taking huge swaths of Afghan territory under its control. Afghan conundrum has entered now into an end phase called as ‘endgame in Afghanistan’, as United States after failing to defeat Taliban is leaving Afghanistan.

During these eighteen years of Afghan war, the role of regional powers to ensure success in Afghanistan has remained very dubious and critical, because of their diverging interests. Now, when United States is leaving Afghanistan and Afghanistan being a landlocked country, the role of these regional powers has become more important, to bring some kind of semblance of normalcy in this war-ravaged country. The important regional players include; Pakistan, China, Russia, Iran and India.

Role of regional powers

Pakistan

The most critical player in Afghanistan’s endgame is Pakistan, because of its geographical proximity, ethnic linkages with Afghans, besides being a frontline state in War on terror. Historically, Pakistan and Afghanistan relations suffered from mistrust and suspicion, as the chequered history of bilateral relationship has been more of animosity than of cooperation with ‘Durand line and Pakhtunistan’, as major irritants.ⁱⁱ Pakistan sees Afghanistan as potentially providing ‘strategic depth’ against India. Pakistan does not want a pro-India regime in Kabul. Consequently, Pakistan is trying to increase its stakes in Afghanistan via Taliban. Defying U.S. pressure, Pakistan is not ready to attack the Afghan-Taliban or destroy its sanctuaries on its soil, because Pakistan does not want to open up another war front, as it already feels itself in a geo-strategic pincer, with Indian and Afghan forces on Eastern and Western borders respectively, marked often by skirmishes and ceasefire violations. In January 2018, President Trump has directly accused Pakistan of ‘housing the very terrorists that we are fighting’.ⁱⁱⁱ However, Donald Trump a year later sought Imran Khan’s help in bringing Afghan endgame to a logical conclusion.

Donald Trump is aware of the fact, that solution to Afghanistan runs through Pakistan. According to Lindsey Graham, a Republican member of Senate Armed Services Committee, “The US may offer Pakistan a Free Trade Agreement(FTA) in return for its assistance in ending the Afghan war.”^{iv} it is largely because of the Pakistan’s efforts that Taliban agreed to talk to Zalmay Kahlilzad. Now, how far Pakistan will exercise its leverage to bring Taliban in the mainstream politics to end the Afghan Conundrum is a million dollar question.

China

Being an Asian economic gaint, with huge economic stakes,China has a significant role in Afghan stability and development. China is very much concerned about the Afghan stability, and because that is vital for the success its Border and Road Initiative (BRI) connecting China with rest of Asia and Europe. China is trying its best to bring Pakistan Afghanistan close to stabilize Afghanistan to secure its economic-cum-security interests. Beijing’s most substantive engagement with Kabul apart from economic, has been in border control measures designed to prevent terrorists from entering china especially Xinjiang, where tension between Han majority and Muslim Uighur minority has in recent years led to several waves of violence. Besides Islamic State (IS), Chinese government perceives terrorist groups –particularly the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) which seeks independence for Xinjiang –as the most security threat to its national security.^v Withdrawal of US will provide room for extremist groups to launch attacks on Chinese interests. It has already happened,and it may intensify. China’s outreach to Afghanistan for peace and reconciliation is not new, for china is a part of many regional, sub-regional and international forums including Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and Quadrilateral Coordination Group (QCG) comprising Afghanistan, Pakistan china and U.S.A. Beijing-Kabul ties have increased significantly as Afghan president, Ashraf Ghani choosing China as his first overseas visit in 2014.If the Taliban takes power in Afghanistan, only China and not USA can prevent them from destabilising the region. Such a Taliban regime will have to depend heavily on Pakistan who in turn depends critically on Chinese backing. China, has a vital interest in the survival of Pakistan and in regional stability. This interest is due to China’s ethno religious makeup and geographical location.^{vi}In October, 2018 Pakistani Islamic cleric MaulanaSamiul Haq, who is known as the “Father of the Taliban”, called on China to play a bigger role in the peace process. Beijing now has the kind of influence over Pakistan that can bring the Taliban’s backers in the Pakistani army fully on board. Any Afghan settlement can only be established and maintained if China plays the leading role.

Russia

Likewise, Russia have also considerably increased their presence in Afghanistan after drawdown of Allied forces. As

Russia is at loggerheads with with U.S., the former would not like increasing U.S. presence in the region. In the past year, multiple U.S. commanders have warned of increased levels of assistance and perhaps even material support for the Taliban from Russia, for which Russia cite IS presence in Afghanistan to justify their activities.¹⁸ Russia’s attempts are motivated by a sole objective of confronting the United States, where it is possible.¹⁹ Russia has significant contacts with Taliban as Taliban also agreed to attend Afghan peace led by Russia in Moscow, though postponed later on by Russia after U.S. and Afghan Government decided not to attend the conference.²⁰

After the failure of Quadrilateral coordination group, Russia is trying to bring the Taliban and the Afghan government to the negotiating table, as it fears that continued Afghan instability will threaten its Central Asian allies that share a border with Afghanistan. In case of a U.S. withdrawal, Russia will desire and aspire to take the lead role in Afghanistan affairs. In Moscow, on November 9, 2018, the Russian Foreign Ministry hosted a multinational conference on the conflict that included officials from Afghanistan, China, Iran, Pakistan, Central Asian Republics, and the United States. Taliban refused to engage in direct conversations with Afghan representatives present at the table. Russia is now cultivating closer relationships with the Taliban and Pakistan to reclaim its influence. After that Russia conducted a series of conferences under the “Moscow Format” to bring endgame in Afghanistan to a logical conclusion.

Iran

Iranian policy on Afghanistan is principally based on hedging against both the Islamic State and U.S. policy towards Tehran. Because of the latter consideration, Iran tacitly supported the Taliban intermittently during the last decade, despite its distaste for the Taliban’s brand of Islam and determined political opposition to them during the late 1990s.^{vii}Iran cannot be ignored as an influential regional player. The country has broad investments in Afghanistan. It has a common and volatile border. Drug trafficking emanating from Afghanistan could spill over into Iran. Teheran is now openly in talks with the Taliban and says the aim is to bring the Taliban and the government of Ashraf Ghani together.^{viii}Iran also has a special relationship with the Hazara, the Heratis and other smaller Shia groups inside Afghanistan. Hazara, Tajik, or Uzbeks will likely to turn to Iran for support if they find their interests are threatened by the peace agreement.

Iran has traditionally allied itself with and supported most Northern Alliance groups.As the vanguard of Shia Islam, the Iranian regime has been only mildly less opposed to the Deobandi-inspired Afghan Taliban than it has been to the ideological extremism of Salafi-based groups such as the Islamic State. Iran, like Russia, shares concerns of growing IS presence in Afghanistan and would want to keep that influence in check. The convergence of strategic interests and avenues to expand their influence has led to increased presence of both Iran and Russia in Afghanistan, to the extent that analysts

view a possible 'cooperation' of Moscow and Tehran in Afghanistan. Iran wants an inclusive government in Kabul, where Taliban gets a due share, because Iran and Taliban share same view vis-a-vis Taliban.

India

Historically, India has had a good relations with Afghanistan except Taliban period. Afghanistan is strategically important for India for several reasons —firstly, India would always like a stable Afghanistan to have a hassle-free access to Central Asia and secondly_ India would not like Afghan soil to be used for anti-Indian activities especially those of related to terrorism. India contends that the perpetuation of the Afghan conflict entirely on Pakistan's uncompromising support for the Taliban. In New Delhi's eyes, the Taliban may represent a genuine Afghan protest against the Kabul central government post-September 11, 2001, but its endurance is entirely due to Pakistani support that is intended to coerce Afghanistan even as Rawalpindi plays a double game with the United States—accepting U.S. assistance in targeting transnational terrorism while effectively shielding the Taliban. In these circumstances, India sees its nonsecurity assistance to Afghanistan as helping to stabilize the country, demonstrating solidarity with the larger international effort, and assisting a weaker Kabul in standing up to a stronger Islamabad. Successive Indian governments have encouraged the United States to steadfastly prosecute the military campaign in Afghanistan. India contends that it will support what-ever the Afghan government chooses in regard to reconciliation, as long as Kabul is not coerced, the integration of the Taliban takes place through a constitutional process, and all sections of Afghan society are comfortable with the terms of reconciliation. However, there is no consensus in new Delhi vis-a-vis India's stand on talks with Taliban and the current reconciliation process in Afghanistan. Pakistan continues to claim that India has no role to play in Afghanistan; NATO, too, seems to have bought into this line of thinking. Alejandro Alvargonzález, NATO's Assistant Secretary-General for Political Affairs and Security Policy, was quoted saying that while India has a "prominent place in Afghanistan," so do "hundreds of others." It appeared as though Alvargonzález was suggesting that India cannot be made a party to the talks just because Pakistan is there. India's decision to take part in the Moscow Consultations and non-officially share the table with the Taliban looks like its attempt to stay in the loop. India's strategic initiative in the context of the ongoing talks is critically dependent on what Afghanistan does and does not do^{ix}. India holds that any peace talks regarding Afghanistan's future should be Afghan owned and Afghan-led, keeping in consideration the constitutional rights of every group living inside Afghanistan, including women.

Conclusion

To conclude it can be said that, a positive and durable peace in Afghanistan is the need of hour. To realise this objective, unless, Afghanistan and regional actors with shared threats and commonalities do not come on one page, besides making Taliban realize that they cannot win the war either, any peace and reconciliation process will not bore fruit for Afghanistan in the near future.

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[ⁱⁱ] Thomas H. Johnson and M. Chris Mason, "*No sign until the burst of fire: Understanding the Pakistan- Afghanistan-Frontier*" , international security 32,2(2008), pp.41-77.

[ⁱⁱⁱ] White House Office of the press secretary, remarks by president Trump on Strategy in Afghanistan and South Asia, August 21,2017.

[^{iv}] The Economic Times, january 24,2019.

[^v]Angela stanzel, "*Fear and loathing on the New Silk Road: China's Security in Afghanistan and beyond*" ,July12,2018,<https://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/new-silk-road-chinese-security-in-Afghanistan-beyond>.

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[^{vii}] Margherita Stancati, "Iran Backs Taliban With Cash and Arms," *Wall Street Journal*, June 11, 2015, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/iran-backs-taliban-with-cash-and-arms-1434065528>.

[^{viii}]Alireza Nader, Ali G. Scotten, Ahmad Idrees Rahmani, Robert Stewart, Leila Mahnad, Iran's Influence in Afghanistan : Implications for the U.S. Drawdown, Rand Corporation, 2014, available at : https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR600/R616/RAND_RR616.pdf

[^{ix}]The Hindu, 12 March 2019.