

Post-2014 Instability in Afghanistan: Impact and Role of Regional Players

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Security Situation

The security situation in Afghanistan can be described as a stalemate at both the strategic and tactical levels. The fledgling Afghan National Army (ANA) and the Afghan National Police (ANP), which have now assumed full responsibility for security from the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), are not yet equal to the task. Their numbers are small (352,000); they lack experience; standards of junior leadership are low; and they are inadequately trained and equipped. They lack heavy weapons, artillery, air support and helicopters for logistics support. They are poorly trained, badly led and lack the motivation necessary to sustain complex counter-insurgency operations on a prolonged basis. Fratricide and desertions with weapons are commonplace. Hence, the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) are not yet capable of undertaking counter-insurgency operations autonomously and need more time to settle down as cohesive infantry battalions.

While the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO)-ISAF forces control most of the large towns, the Taliban—together with Al Qaeda—control large swathes of the countryside. Governance is virtually non-existent outside Kabul. Though significant funds are being expended on socio-economic development by the Afghan government as well as by donors like India (the US alone has pumped in \$ 56 billion), the results have consistently fallen short of the country's requirement. This is partly due to inadequate supervision and partly due to rampant corruption.

Though the US-led forces are not exactly losing and the Taliban are not winning, a stalemate between a superpower and a motley array of rag-tag militiamen of a non-state actor will be seen as a moral victory for the Taliban. The US strategy to clear-hold-build-transfer-exit has succeeded only partially as Al Qaeda has not been completely eliminated. Hence, no matter whether the Afghan government agrees to limit US presence to 10,000 to 12,000 soldiers or a lesser number, Special Forces and drone strikes against the remnants of Al Qaeda and the leaders of other organisations considered inimical to US national interest will continue, including on Pakistani soil, with or without the concurrence of the Pakistan government and Army.

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NATO-ISAF Drawdown

In 2011, President Barack Obama approved plans to drawdown US, NATO and ISAF troops from Afghanistan. The withdrawal of combat troops is to be completed by December 2014. A small number of troops is likely to be left behind at Kabul, Bagram and Kandahar to provide training and logistics support and to continue the drone war against hardcore terrorists inimical to US interests.

The NATO-ISAF withdrawal is likely to leave a security deficit in Afghanistan, which will further add to regional instability in a region that has become known as the epicentre of fundamentalist terrorism. There is no evidence at present that Washington and its allies are planning to help the Afghan government to maintain security by supplementing Afghan efforts through the deployment of a viable international peace-keeping force under the UN flag after the NATO-ISAF military withdrawal is completed in 2014. The willingness of regional actors to play a positive role in stabilising Afghanistan, rather than pursuing divergent national interests and disparate agendas, is also uncertain.

Regional Players, Divergent Agendas

Unless the Central Asian states, China, India, Iran, Pakistan and Russia jointly contribute towards ensuring stability, the security environment in Afghanistan is likely to deteriorate into a civil war. However, Afghanistan's neighbours have their own challenges and agendas that are at variance with the requirements.

China: Afghanistan has emerged as a treasure trove of mineral deposits (estimates vary between \$ 1 and 3 trillion), but it is China that has benefited the most so far. For example, China signed a \$2.9 billion agreement with Kabul in December 2007 to extract copper from the Aynak deposit, which is estimated to contain 240 million tonnes of ore. Beijing maintains close strategic ties with Pakistan and may support Islamabad's continuing efforts to ensure the Taliban return to power. China is unlikely to join a UN peace-keeping force to stabilise Afghanistan as such a force will almost certainly be led by a US commander. However, China is unlikely to block the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) from seeking an amicable solution to the Afghan conflict.

India: India has historically had friendly ties with Afghanistan and wishes to see a stable government installed in Kabul that is neutral to both India and Pakistan. It has funded some Afghan reconstruction and development plans, spending \$1.2 billion so far. It has recently committed another \$500 million. The funds have been spent on building the 218 km-long Zaranj-Delaram road linking the Iranian border with the Garland Highway, electric power lines including one from the Central Asian Republics (CARs) to Kabul, hydroelectric power projects, school buildings, primary health centres and the new building for the Afghan Parliament. India is also training Afghan administrators, teachers and officer cadets, but only within India. While at present there is no support in India for sending troops to Afghanistan, there is realisation that the fight against the Taliban and Al Qaeda has long-term security implications for India. With some effort, New Delhi could be persuaded to deploy up to one division (15,000 troops) to join a UN peace-keeping force provided Pakistan's sensibilities about Indian military presence in Afghanistan can be taken care of.

India seeks a peaceful and stable Afghanistan with a broad-based government that is genuinely independent in formulating its foreign and national security policies, as well as in governing the country in consonance with Afghan customs and traditions. India believes that the imposition of the Western model of democracy will not be appropriate as it will not work in Afghanistan's socio-political milieu. India would like to see the elimination of terrorism from Afghanistan and the destruction of all sanctuaries of the Taliban and international terrorist groups like Al Qaeda so that there is no export of terrorism from the country. India supports the integration and strengthening of military and police forces at the national level, rather than their domination by one or more ethnic communities. India would like to encourage Afghanistan's regional neighbours

and the international community to further enhance their efforts towards reconstruction and economic development.

It is the considered Indian view that Afghanistan's problems cannot be resolved unless the linkages with Pakistan are also addressed simultaneously. Also, India's efforts to provide assistance to Afghanistan are hampered considerably by the lack of geographical contiguity and limited access. India is making serious efforts to remove Pakistan's misapprehensions about India's role in Afghanistan, but Pakistan has steadfastly refrained from discussing this issue with India because of mutual suspicions. It is crucial for India and Pakistan to discuss their suspicions at the official level so as to allay each other's apprehensions and work together for peace and stability.

Iran: Iran's wait-and-watch policy that has been in place since December 2001 is continuing unchanged. Iran is concerned about the flow of fundamentalist terrorism and narcotics from Afghanistan. It also fears the exodus of a large number of refugees if the security situation deteriorates rapidly after the exit of NATO-ISAF troops, even though Iran would be happy to see their backs.

Iran is also under pressure due to US sanctions over its quest for the acquisition of nuclear weapons and fears a joint US-Israel attack on its nuclear installations. Under the circumstances, Iran would not like instability in Afghanistan to add to its strategic challenges and is more likely to cooperate rather than confront the international community in Afghanistan. However, Iran is unlikely to join a UN stabilisation force. Iran could contribute by allowing the use of the road from Chabahar port to Zaranj to open up a new route for logistics supplies. Such a move will substantially reduce the present dependence on the two land routes that pass through Pakistan's Quetta and Peshawar. This can happen only if the US mends its fences with Iran.

Pakistan: The Pakistan Army and the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) are continuing to support militant groups like the Haqqani network that are fighting the NATO-ISAF forces by providing safe havens, from where they can launch attacks across the Durand Line into Afghanistan. This is so even as the Pakistan Army itself faces well-coordinated attacks by the Pakistani Taliban like the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and the Tehrik-e-Nifaz-e-Shariat-e-Mohammadi (TNSM) from across the border. With a stand-off in US-Pakistan relations, the US is continuing with its strategy of trans-border drone strikes to eliminate the

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Al Qaeda leadership, and Pakistan is delaying the launch of operations against the TTP in North Waziristan.

Pakistan still seeks 'strategic depth' in Afghanistan and would prefer to have a pliable regime in Kabul when the NATO-ISAF mission ends in 2014. Pakistan does not support the Afghan reconciliation process as a successful outcome will reduce Pakistan's role in conflict resolution. Pakistan has failed to realise that continuing insurgency in Afghanistan is fuelling instability in its own northwest and will further destabilise the country when its economy is in ruins and the political situation is spiralling out of control. Pakistan seeks to limit India's influence in Afghanistan and opposes the induction of Indian troops as well as *in-situ* training.

Russia and the CARs: Russia and the CARs remain key players and have a huge stake in Afghanistan's future stability. The Central Asian states, particularly Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, will be directly affected by instability in Afghanistan. Due to a persistent inadequacy of state capacity and military capability, these states can at best ensure that their territory is not used as a safe haven by the Taliban. They could also continue to help with limited logistics support.

The agreement signed by Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan with the NATO-ISAF forces in June 2012 to permit military hardware being transported out of Afghanistan as part of the drawdown is a major concession and signals their desire to make a meaningful contribution to conflict resolution. Russia signed a similar agreement in early-July 2012. However, Russia and the CARs are unlikely to go so far as to join the fight against the Taliban by contributing troops to a stabilisation force.

Conclusion

Peace and stability in Afghanistan are critical for stability in the fragile South Asian region. However, the security situation that is likely to prevail in Afghanistan post-2014 is a cause for concern, as the ANSF appear incapable of ensuring a violence free security environment when they are given independent responsibility. This is due to the inadequacy of numbers, poor training, lack of the required arms and equipment and the proclivity of the ill-motivated soldiers to desert and refuse to fight. Junior leadership standards also leave much to be desired. It is essential for the international community to organise a "responsible withdrawal" from Afghanistan and not leave the country in the lurch, particularly in the field of security. Otherwise, the fallout from the planned NATO-ISAF drawdown will be

extremely negative for the whole region. Under the circumstances, Afghanistan's regional neighbours need to step in to fill the void.

Good governance, including a transparent system for the delivery of justice; sustained socio-economic development; and, a secure environment for the first two to flourish, are the three pillars of a successful counter-insurgency campaign. In Afghanistan, the post-ISAF security environment is likely to spin out of control if supplementary security arrangements are not conceived soon and put in place quickly with the help of Afghanistan's regional neighbours.

A hasty withdrawal without viable alternative security arrangements will lead to the return of the Taliban and contribute further to regional instability. Instability in Afghanistan will fuel Islamist fundamentalist terrorism and assist the return of Al Qaeda. The international community will need to accommodate the core interests of the regional countries in seeking a lasting solution to the Afghan conflict.

The Taliban and its affiliates like Al Qaeda must not be allowed ever again to launch terrorist strikes from safe havens and sanctuaries within Afghanistan. India's national interests lie in a peaceful and stable Afghanistan that is governed by a broad-based government free of foreign interference in policy-making. India supports all efforts towards improving the security situation and providing good governance. It is only through sustained reconstruction and concerted socio-economic development that future stability can be assured. India will continue to provide aid and assistance to the government and the people of Afghanistan as it has been consistently doing over the past ten years.

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