

Prospects for Peace in Afghanistan

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Abstract

Afghanistan is reeling under a vicious cycle of instability since the communist coup d'état in April 1978. Peace and harmony remain fragile despite continuous attempts to improvise it. The ongoing military drawdown is stroking fears of dark days returning again as Taliban gets powerful and is unapologetically open about. Other opportunistic elements also are on the offensive. The neighbours are becoming anxious as a result and might encourage favoured networks. Pakistan, Iran and India in particular might resume spoil sport all over again, making lives of ordinary Afghans even more difficult. This paper examines the prospects for peace in the backdrop of emerging scenario within Afghanistan and in the neighbourhood and argues that an enchantment of peace would be contingent on how the internal dynamics play out in coming months and how predatory neighbours respond to, in the light of near certain security vacuum which is likely ensue as foreign forces retreat.

Keywords: Afghanistan, Peace, Taliban, Strategic absurdity

Introduction

The recent prisoner swap between Taliban and the United States has gendered huge debate. For some, it was absolutely necessary to get the captive soldier released.¹ Others however perceive it as a premature act sending wrong signal to terrorists.² It is alleged that far from aiding peace, the swap might endanger it,³ as the prisons released in exchange are dreaded terrorists. It is being whispered that given the stature of the prisoners released, it would sway Taliban's future strategy,⁴ which is not necessarily a good thing because Afghanistan's internal dynamics are acquiring new configuration similar to the one existed when Taliban were in Power. The predatory neighbours seem anxious as a result and possibly rekindle traditional networks and exasperate the crisis even more. This paper is an attempt to examine the emerging trends in Afghanistan and beyond. It argues that enchantment of

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peace would remain contingent on how the internal dynamics play out in coming months and how predatory neighbours respond to it. The paper has four main parts: i) the international dynamics, ii) the external influences, iii) the imperatives of peace, and iv) an estimation of the prospects for peace.

The Internal Dynamics

The ruling conglomerate is shaky and could damage peace prospects. The conglomerate weathered rough conditions earlier but appears inefficient to fix the real problems distressing Afghanistan.⁵ The recent national elections, despite sporadic rigging allegations, confirm the fact that the conglomerate respects the constitution, if not in spirit but in letters. Hamid Karzai, the incumbent President has been running it since 2004, despite presence of warlords in the rank. It is true that Karzai has occasionally acted incorrectly. But it is also true that Karzai ensured continuity of governance, which is not a petite accomplishment.⁶ However, as foreign forces leaving Afghanistan and the Afghan National Army (ANA) takes over country's security command, disgruntled elements might destabilize the government with veiled support from Taliban.⁷ If ANA fails to repel such an attempt, it could alter the internal dynamic and weaken prospects for peace.

Looming Taliban Threat is the other factor that could affect internal dynamics adversely. The operation enduring freedom dislodged Taliban quite quickly – it started on 7 October 2001 and direct fight with Taliban was over by December that year.⁸ In June 2004, the Bush Administration claimed victory in the war on terrorism in Afghanistan. The reality was a bit fussy though. Instead of putting fight, large contingent of Taliban simply ran into mountains bordering Pakistan. As we know now, they were contemplating guerrilla campaign and did actually launch one in 2004. The US in concert with NATO started pounding Taliban hideouts with bombs. Given the lethal firepower and coordinated combing operations on the ground, the campaign was quite a success – dozens of senior Taliban fighters either got killed or maimed. The initial successes turned out not so enduring though. The bombing raids killed more non-combatants than combatants.⁹ Despite huge losses, Taliban however refuse to cease the fire.

Finally, the emerging ethnic dynamism is an intricate development. Three striking strands are – the growing Pashtun assertion, increasing nervousness among ethnic minorities as result and resurgent Taliban. With support from across the border¹⁰

(Pakistan), Pashtun elites have been making resolute moves and raising the voice as regards their share in national resources, including political representation. Reports indicate that Pakistan ISI has re-opened communication lines with those who matters among Pashtun, the Haqqani group, for instance.¹¹ Ethnic minorities are anxious as a result. Taliban however appear pragmatic and not in a hurry to turn the guns on the government at the moment. Taken together, the emerging ethnic realignment is intriguing.¹²

The Predators

The predators, namely Pakistan, Iran and India believe that stable and peaceful Afghanistan is vital for their own security. This is perhaps the only thing they agree on. The three have shouldered enough, than any other country for the sake of Afghanistan. Pakistan, Iran had hosted millions of Afghan refugees for decades, even at the cost of personal security. India too has welcomed and continues to welcome Afghan nationals and is one of the most preferred destinations. Yet the three stand accused of meddling in Afghanistan's internal affairs and fuelling unrest to the extent of undermining Afghan national unity by supporting different ethnic factions. The following section is a condensed narrative of predatory profile of the three as far as Afghanistan is concerned.

The Islamic Republic of Pakistan

The cardinal principle guiding Pakistan's Afghan policy is 'strategic depth'.¹³ It conceives Afghanistan as a retreating ground in the face of existential threat from overseas. Islamabad believes that resurgent India is a potential threat to national unity and territorial integrity of Pakistan. The 1947 haphazard partition and resultant communal frenzy are the primary reasons for Pakistan's anti-India stance. The Kashmir issue, India's military superiority are also significant influences. However, Pakistan's disintegration in 1971 seems to be the most important influence. It is this context and past experience, because of which, Pakistan is believed to have begun perceiving Afghanistan a possible strategic depth territory. What this means is that Afghan government should be sensitive to Islamabad's legitimate concerns surrounding national security and should lend uncritical support to Pakistan in the event of foreign aggression. In particular, Afghan government should not develop closer ties with India. In fact, containing India's influence over and challenging its presence in Afghanistan, is at the heart of Pakistan's strategic depth endeavour. As a result, Pakistan is seen

encouraging ethnic divisions there since Soviets left Afghanistan in 1989 - Pakistan supports Afghan Taliban, a predominantly Pashtun militia. When Taliban had captured power in mid 1990s, Pakistan was the first country to recognize them as legitimate government of Afghanistan. The events of 9/11 however changed all that.

Besides, Pakistan harbours Taliban and other militant groups as strategic assets¹⁴ against much larger India.¹⁵ Geographically, economically and militarily India is three times bigger and is one of the reasons for Pakistan's defeats – Indo-Pak wars of 1948, 1965 etc. Pakistan did try to negate India's conventional advantage by forging security alliance with the US and China. The allies, however, could not bridge Pakistan's military gap with India. The US and Chinese support to Pakistan was quite good to begin with, but transformed over the years, as India repositioned itself on the world stage. What's more, New Delhi not merely transformed Kashmir narrative but also brought Islamabad into the binding bilateral negotiations – the Shimla Accord (1972). Given these biting realities and Islamabad's inability to influence them favourably, it harbours outfits like LeT to fight India by proxy. Taliban is the latest group in series of many others, trained and armed by Pakistan ISI. Pakistan's strategy appears to engaging India by proxy and put pressure on it to hurry up Kashmir resolution. In other words, for Pakistan, Taliban and their ilk are indispensable strategic assets; and what better territory than Afghanistan to house and train them.

Pakistan uses crisis in Afghanistan as bargain chip to bag foreign aid and shores up its fighting force instead. Pakistan's ruling establishment, (both military and political) holds the fire in Afghanistan to extract as much aid and support from overseas. In fact, Pakistan army makes up a considerable share of expenditure from overseas. It all began with Soviet occupation of Afghanistan (1989). Islamabad had taken upon itself the mantle of fighting the Soviets by proxy with dependable support from within Afghanistan. Ethnic Pashtun segment was enlisted to do the job. The assistance started flowing in instantaneously. The Western powers had limited options to face off Soviets directly and Islamabad was willing to do as necessary. Islamabad got the offer and began a fighting enterprise led by Islamic radicals - Taliban. The rest is history. Now, Taliban are Pakistan ISI's most viable strategic asset. Western donors got what they were hoping for – ouster of Soviets; and Islamabad, a well trained militia to promote national interests in Afghanistan and elsewhere – Indian Kashmir included. Dozens of violent attacks are credited to Taliban with

hundreds of lives lost and property worth billions destroyed. Moral of the story is – Islamabad harbours array of non-state actors, housed and trained across the border in Afghanistan. Pakistan's supposed turnaround against non-state actors, post 9/11 appears insincere. It is alleged that even now, Pakistan augments Taliban capabilities, shelters the leadership and allow them to manoeuvre all across its tribal region bordering Afghanistan. Here, Islamabad might be trying to convey a message – that only it has the means to restore order in Afghanistan.

The currently unravelling geo-political great game in Central Asia also induces Pakistan's manoeuvre in Afghanistan.¹⁶ Islamabad seems to be labouring on a pet project – a trade corridor connecting Central Asia via Afghanistan. A friendly Afghan government is indispensable for the project and if materialized could through back hefty benefits; and geo-strategic advantage would be a plus. Reportedly, Central Asia seats on huge energy resource untapped and arguably is the future geo-political theatre.¹⁷ Given the unstoppable march of neo-liberal economic model around the world and its reliance on uninterrupted energy supply, the big powers would not spare any part of the world. Asia in general and Central Asia in particular are going to be at the heart of global politics and being in close proximity, Pakistan could play a role in it; or so thinks the governing elites of Pakistan. Moreover, India, Pakistan's arch rival is trying to lay foot in Central Asia and could adversely affect Pakistan, or so believes the Pakistan establishment. Additionally, the great powers – the US, Russia and China – need an obedient ally like Pakistan. And more important, Pakistan would be reaping fruits of the great game with minimal investment, for it would act more as transit rather than a component. All Islamabad however has to do is secure safe corridor in Afghanistan and a friendly government in Kabul. In other words, Pakistan prey Afghanistan for more than one reason and is one of the staunch backers of Taliban and seems to be willing to play along as effectively as it can.

The Islamic Republic of Iran

For Iran, Afghanistan is a distinct neighbour with political anomalies and requires outside support. Iran shares a porous border with Afghanistan, besides an ethno-religious affinity dates back to centuries. Afghans living along the border with Iran are sparsely spread and was one of the oldest trade partners. The links are not confined to commodities alone; they go far beyond onto culture arena. The governing elites were not only the part of mutual

exchange but were the trend setters. The most visible impact of this self-perpetuating exchange is the spread of Shia Islam across the border in Afghanistan, which constitutes around 17 percent of the population. Iran's prime concern is their safety and security. Moreover the radical Sunni Islam makes out Shias as 'others' and their hatred towards Shias is well known. Consequently, Tehran has rarely shown reluctance in extending support across the border. Realizing difficulties associated with addressing political disabilities in Afghanistan, Tehran seems to prefer direct offer of protection and help to Shias in Afghanistan. Tehran however has not meted out differential treatment to non-Shias. Iran hosted millions of Afghan refugees in 1980s and 1990s without any discrimination on ethnic or religious beliefs whatsoever.

The security imperatives however force Tehran to take interest in Afghanistan's internal affairs that go beyond protection of Shias.¹⁸ National unity is and shall always be the prime mover of any country's foreign policy and Iran is no different. Tehran does support some ethnic networks in Afghanistan. Its major concern is growing Sunni extremism and abnormal gatherings of Arabs with petro dollars and a Kalashnikov. Islamabad's geo-political manoeuvres and the use of Sunni radicals as pawn, is also worrying Tehran and has been one of the most vocal critics of that policy. In order to arrest the tide of Sunni extremism and resultant violence, Tehran backs Afghan minority – Hazars, Tajiks, and Uzbeks and offers aid, including light weapons to fight back. Tehran's real worry however is – if Sunni extremism is not enclosed inside Afghanistan could spill over onto its territory.

The additional factor unnerving Iran is the presence of foreign forces in Afghanistan. The ongoing Iran-West rivalry in general and the Iran-Israel in particular is quite a known saga. Tehran's refusal to recognize existence of Israel and incessant verbal spat over West's involvement in the region is rarely ceased. Given West's consistent refusal to recognize Iran's right to nuclear energy for peaceful purpose, Tehran fears that presence of Western forces on Afghanistan is an impediment to national security. Moreover, reported espionage on Iran's security establishment and nuclear facilities by CIA, operating from Afghanistan is a great cause of concern; and Tehran rarely shy away from voicing displeasure about. Further, it believes that the West wants to destabilize Iran and undermines Islamic revolution. The West's familiar enthusiasm to encourage defection of Iranian scientist and intellectuals also unnerves Tehran and has been one of the major bones of contention. The fostering instability next door in Iraq,

Israel's growing clout, the US-Saudi-Turkey nexus, Tehran believes a deliberate attempt to isolate Iran. This is the larger geopolitical context that induces Iran and its involvement in Afghanistan however muted is a part of its response to strategic development in the region.

The Republic of India

The most significant variable influencing India's Afghan policy is the dispute of Jammu and Kashmir (henceforth Kashmir). The dispute is a product of the manner in which British India was divided in 1947. The crisis arose when the Hindu ruler of predominantly Muslim Kashmir decided to join India. Pakistan condemned the decision. India however dismisses the condemnation saying, it is a secular country and any province could join the ranks and promises to defend Kashmir to the hilt. Islamabad did try to impose resolution by force but could not succeed and the dispute lingers on. International efforts have proved fruitless so far. Both New Delhi and Islamabad continue to hold the historical position and designate the other as 'invader'. The people of Kashmir have been under virtual military rule on either side of the dividing line, since 1948.¹⁹ After long duress and suffering, in 1989, the Kashmiris launched insurgency in India administered part. Though insurgency was largely home-grown, it has had an outside element.²⁰ Pakistan military and the Islamic militants constitute that outside element. Yes, insurgency has gone down considerably, but did not cease completely, because it enjoys support in Kashmir and from across the border. The link with Afghanistan is that Islamists of all hues residing in Afghanistan have sympathized with the people of Kashmir and vowed to support them until Kashmir is liberated. Moreover, it is seen that whenever Islamists (Taliban) ruled Afghanistan violence in Kashmir surged. For instance, when Taliban were in power in mid 1990s, Kashmir saw manifold increase in militant activities and remained in global news, all for the wrong reasons. It is for this reason, New Delhi wish to install a multi-ethnic government in Afghanistan which would deny its territory for anti-India activities. For India, Kashmir is not just a piece of land but a crown jewel. Moreover, if Kashmir were to walk out of the national fold, it likely stroke copy cats elsewhere. More than anything, New Delhi would like to influence and shape Afghan politics for its own interests.

Counter balancing Pakistan's growing clout in the region is also India's one of the aims; and it does through hounding

Islamabad on Afghan territory. As stated earlier, Pakistan is not merely seeking strategic depth in Afghanistan but trying to earn it as 'transit' to Central Asia. Additionally, if Islamabad succeeds, it would boost its geo-strategic clout in the region, besetting New Delhi's regional ambitions. It would potentially squeeze India's energy pursuit in Central Asia.²¹ For India, the footprints in Afghanistan is a beginning of more assertive role in the region and if fails, jeopardize similar ambitions elsewhere - Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bhutan for example. It is also true that by seeking thick presence, India is trying to position intelligence gathering units close to Pakistan so that it would have strategic edge. Above all, the very presence of India on Afghan territory is proofs suffice, conveying a calm but assertive message that India is watching Pakistan closely. Should New Delhi succeed in building even a moderate political understanding with Afghan government and if manages to strike a military deal, it would not only surround Pakistan from both - east and west - but sandwich Pakistan. Moreover, New Delhi can possibly feed secessionist movement in Pakistan's already disgruntled tribal region bordering Afghanistan. Despite India going extra mile to argue that its foreign policy is not Pakistan centric, it is obvious that it is trying to balance Pakistan's growing clout.

Finally, India is victim of terrorism and Afghanistan is a part of its counter terrorism strategy. India bleeds not only in Kashmir as a result of Islamic militancy. Indian cities - Mumbai, Delhi, Bangalore to name but three have suffered terrorist violence. Every time a terror incident occurs, needle of suspicion is poised towards Pakistan for harbouring, training and arming terrorists targeting India. Terror from across the border is perhaps the most important issue and it has halted negotiations with Islamabad time and again, saying 'terror and talks cannot go together'. In fact, terrorists coming from across the border into India are the prime reason as to why India-Pakistan dialogue process has not had an institutionalized formant. For, in the face of grave provocation, it would be difficult for India to honour binding commitments that institutions impose. Besides, each terror incident exposes India's weakness as regards its preventive ability and leads to vicious cycle of fear and frustration - India has hardly brought the real perpetrators to book so far - the master minds. Therefore, seeking a strong and stable Afghan government sans Islamists is a goal New Delhi has been pursuing since the fall of Taliban in 2001. In other words, Afghanistan, as far as India is concerned, is an important part of counter terrorism strategy which

it can ignore at its own peril. Keeping the Islamists out of corridors of Power in Kabul if not defeat them absolutely is one of India's major objectives.

Requisites for Peace

First, the internal dynamic needed to be re-ordered. The foremost responsibility for stabilizing Afghanistan is of Afghans themselves. Ethnic difference is a social reality but ethnic groups had lived peacefully in the past. In fact, Afghanistan has had a political culture set on respect for diversity and difference. Therefore, majority and minority groups need to rise to the occasion and look beyond the horizon. Such a mature and magnanimous posture is possible if the stake holders put aside the absurd infighting. To begin with, they should revitalize age old grievance redressal mechanisms – *Loya Jirga*, for example. Second, there are too many weapons floating around in Afghanistan which must come back to the state armoury. If stake holders put the nation first, the task of building a peaceful, stable and vibrant society is not that difficult. With a long legacy of peace and harmony, Afghanistan could become the beacon of hope and propriety once again. Concurrently, there is a need to de-radicalize young minds via all means and take them back into the mainstream. For all this to come alive, the ruling warlords would have to accommodate change and throw open governing avenues for the newcomers. Also, the different ethnic groups need to throw the foreign militants out and must not allow their territory to be used for the so called global Jihad. Jihad and jihadists are ruining Afghanistan and the only viable way ahead seems to be – live peacefully first and then contextualize Islam. Afghan Taliban in particular need to practice Islam first and then preach. Islam is not about jihad alone and not certainly the type of jihad they have been mouthing. Afghanistan remained united despite its seemingly incurable divisions for centuries and perceived divisions can be overcome by revitalizing the traditional political culture of tolerance.

Second, the outside powers must disengage from Afghanistan. One of the disturbing facts is that outsiders have often exploited Afghanistan's weaknesses. Afghanistan is being denied the opportunity to choose suitable pathways to progress. The neighbours make all the right noises – a stable and peaceful Afghanistan is all they want to see, but in practice have acted exactly the opposite. Pakistan for instance has invited faraway powers and afforded all possible assistance. The only condition was that such powers shore up its posture on Kashmir and augment

its arm forces. In 1979, India too had extended recognition to communist regime to gratify Moscow. New Delhi knew too well that communist regime is an imposition from above and may not serve Afghan interests. Iran also made use of instability in Afghanistan to augment its regional posture. What's more, India-Pakistan rivalry is playing out in Afghanistan. There is hardly any other country which has caused so much instability and violence inside Afghanistan than Pakistan and India. Pakistan in particular, the self-proclaimed responsible nuclear weapon state is ruining a vulnerable neighbour with active connivance of the world's lone superpower. The so called geo-strategic interests cannot get more absurd than this. The call of the moment is outsiders – Pakistan, Iran, India and the so called democratic West must disengage from Afghanistan.

Finally, respect of human rights should become an integral part of governance. Afghanistan has suffered too much and is one of the places where human rights get violated with impunity. The ethnic minorities, women, children etc are the victims of political and cultural violence. The minorities – Tajiks, Uzbeks and Hazars are facing persecution. Hatred and fears have been part and parcel of their lives far too long. Their places of worship and residence are being hounded by the Sunni extremists. Similarly, women are being subjected to all kinds of repression and denied fundamental rights. Women's bodies have become favoured stage, where culture is depicted and been reduced to mere carriers of morality. Children too are bearing the brunt of social upheaval. Child labour, drug abuse, sexual violence of the minors is on the rise and the state institutions are too weak to do anything about it.

Prospects for Peace

Some sorts of understanding among ethnic factions is possible but would not come about easily. Different ethnic communities have lived together peacefully for centuries and can do so again. History is witness that Afghanistan had enjoyed long spells of peace and tranquillity right up to the late 1970s. Beginning from the accession of Amir Abdurrahman in 1881 to the communist coup d'état in 1978, Afghanistan enjoyed greater stability than many European countries. During this period Afghanistan had only six rulers. The only exception was the interregnum of 18 months in 1928-1929. Yes, there were disruptions along the way but disruptions did not rupture federal governance. There has also been violent confrontations among ethnic groups (e.g. a civil war between 1928-1929) threatening peace but did not lose much

longer, for the prevailing system did allow the ruling elites to retain their support base. It was necessary to maintain local power dynamic, a key ingredient without which national government could not receive recognition. Regional and provincial warlords were willing to recognize national authority, but only if their clan was allowed to retain unique identity and interests. In short, the traditional political culture was the glue holding Afghan unity and if recognized and fostered can hold it even now.²² It is this traditional political culture of tolerance all Afghans must strive for. The desire to see democracy flourish in Afghanistan has to be set on that traditional political culture and not on American or European Christian ideals. Forging ethnic understanding based on local political culture is possible and would enhance the prospects for peace but unfortunately the hum is not very encouraging at the moment.

Neighbours hold the key because crisis in Afghanistan is a regional one.²³ Afghanistan through much of its history had been a state with modest means and soft borders. It hardly had a strong centre having firm control all over its territory. Free movement of people and commerce across the borders were quite regular and continued for centuries. Soft borders also produced crisscross culture including cross-border marriages. Language, customs, religion travelled back and forth giving rise to a shared experience. Further, Afghanistan had been predominantly agrarian and depended on external support. Afghanistan did not face any significant blockades, despite neighbours like Pakistan (India then), China was being ruled by different empires. On the contrary, colonial rulers encouraged trade between them. Even occasional interference in Afghanistan's internal affairs by neighbours could not stroke secession. Even now, no neighbour wants to annex Afghan territory; all they want is a stable and peaceful Afghanistan. Afghanistan however stands at the critical juncture today. Afghan society has transformed since the communist coup d'état in 1978 – it got fractured along ethnic lines more than ever before. The neighbours also have ceased to be good old friends. As regards the prospects for peace, the neighbours – Pakistan, Iran and India in particular would have to cease the strategic absurdity, which seems implausible in the short run.

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