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India, the US and Afghanistan: Arc of Anxiety or a New Silk Road?

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The US strategy in Afghanistan has evolved significantly since its initial intervention in 2001, with the objective being redefined from establishing a vibrant Afghan state to eliminating the terrorist threat

from Afghanistan. President Barack Obama's announcement in 2009, promising both a surge in American troops and a timeline for early withdrawal, conveyed a message to the Taliban that the US would not be in Afghanistan for an extended period. Not surprisingly, with sustained support from Pakistan, the Taliban have demonstrated growing resilience and self-confidence. Meanwhile, the US is scaling down its military presence and the future of Afghanistan appears perilous.



As Prime Minister Manmohan Singh heads for his summit meeting with President Barack Obama on September 27, 2013 developments in Afghanistan appear likely to pose a significant challenge for India-US relations in the coming months.

Concentric Rings and Erroneous Linkages

Given the certainty of the drawdown of US troops in Afghanistan, what are the contours of US policy towards the Af-Pak region and their implications for India?

An examination of the writings and statements of senior US officials provides some indicators. In a co-authored work titled "Afghan Peace Talks – A Primer," James Dobbins, the current US Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan, enunciated a "concentric rings" approach to address the security situation in Afghanistan.¹ According to this Shinn-Dobbins hypothesis, the relationship between the Kabul government and the Taliban constitutes the core of the problem. The US and Pakistan form the first ring of actors whose concerns should be factored in addressing the Afghan imbroglio. India, Iran and Russia constitute the second ring.

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For the US to achieve a negotiated peace, therefore, letting the Taliban have a “role in Afghan governance short of total control”² in exchange for cutting ties with Al Qaeda and ending its insurgency must assume primacy. Further, for this approach to succeed, the co-operation of Pakistan is critical, as it has considerable influence over the Taliban.

Not surprisingly, the US has adopted a multi-pronged approach to solicit Pakistan's co-operation. First, validate Pakistan's self-serving approach. It is not surprising that Dobbins recently stated that “any improvement in Indo-Pak ties will almost automatically improve the Afghanistan situation.”³ Implicit in that statement is the assumption that India-Pakistan relations are a cause for the current quagmire in Afghanistan. This has been Pakistan's contention for quite some time and it appears that elements in US foreign policy-making circles have readily brought into this association.

In reality, the Kashmir issue and tensions in India-Pakistan relations over various others have been present for over six decades. However, the Afghan problem in its current form and the rise of Islamic extremism in the Af-Pak region is a much more recent phenomenon, a consequence of Cold War geo-politics and the political/social infrastructure that was created as a result. The notion that normalising India-Pakistan relations would fundamentally alter the worldview of groups such as the Taliban is not only an erroneous but also a dangerous assumption.

Second, justify Pakistan's security concerns. While US officials have been stating that India has an important role to play in Afghanistan, they have partially ceded ground to Pakistan's portrayal of the Indian presence there as a threat to its national security. James Dobbins recently noted that Pakistan's concerns about the Indian presence in Afghanistan are not entirely groundless.⁴ This is probably the first time that a senior US functionary has referred to India's presence in Afghanistan as something less than benign. Such arguments divert attention from the very considerable good work that India has done in rebuilding Afghanistan against great odds and at considerable cost, both human and financial.

Third, legitimise Pakistan's narrative that it is a victim of terrorism. Recently the White House spokesman noted that Pakistan “is reeling from domestic terrorism.”⁵ While there is no denying the fact that innocent civilians have lost lives in Pakistan because of terrorist acts, the political system and the military in Pakistan cannot claim innocence. The safe haven that Osama Bin Laden enjoyed for almost five years, the co-ordinated prison breaks that facilitated the escape of known terrorists and the extension of financial support by the Punjab provincial government to Jamat-ud-Dawah (JuD) head Hafiz Saeed clearly suggest that Pakistan's political apparatus is anything but a helpless victim of terrorism.⁶ The distinction between domestic and international terrorism is also not tenable.

Finally, instead of demanding more accountability and result-oriented progress from Pakistani leaders, as Hillary Clinton had done in 2011, the US now seems to have reverted to a more accommodating view of Pakistan. This was evident during Secretary of State John Kerry's visit to India in June 2013. As pointed out in an earlier edition of India-US Insight, “The US side did not agree to retaining the specific reference made by the Third Strategic Dialogue held in 2012 that success in Afghanistan and regional and global security require elimination of safe havens and infrastructure for terrorism and violent extremism in Afghanistan and Pakistan.”⁷

It is noteworthy that in spite of the US reaching out to Pakistan and the Taliban, this has yielded little progress. Reports suggest that the Taliban has only made a vague promise that it would not allow Afghanistan to be used for international terrorism.⁸

To the contrary, there are apprehensions regarding the Taliban's commitment to peace negotiations. This is because the Taliban, by describing their office in Doha the "Office of Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan," has attempted to legitimise its role as that of a government-in-exile. If the Taliban believes that it is the government-in-exile, how can it participate in a negotiation process where the current (and legitimate) government in Kabul is one of the parties? Moreover, Taliban leader Mullah Omar has termed the Afghan presidential elections, scheduled to be held in April 2014, as a "waste of time." More recently, a provincial election official in Kunduz province had been reportedly killed by the Taliban⁹ – yet another indication that the Taliban is not interested in the democratic route.

This hardly suggests that the Taliban are keen to sit at the negotiating table. If at all they do, it would only be to delay the process. Clearly, the Taliban perceives that it can negotiate from a position of strength after the US withdrawal, whereupon it may equally be tempted to ensure that its interests prevail through force.

The Taliban has the tactical advantage of playing a waiting game while the US is guided mainly by its necessity to withdraw by 2014.

Indian Concerns

Shifting sands of US policy towards Pakistan and the consequences of the US withdrawal from Afghanistan have long been a source of concern for India. As one of the largest donors to Afghanistan, India has committed approximately \$2 billion in aid and reconstruction. Much of the progress made would be lost if the country descends into civil war. Furthermore, deepening conflict in Afghanistan will also have a deleterious impact on India's security. Most ominously, re-emergence of the Taliban in near total control of Afghanistan will result in the legitimisation of ideological frameworks that sustain Af-Pak terrorist networks and expand their logistical space and safe havens.

While India's capacity and willingness to project hard power into Afghanistan is clearly limited, both countries have announced a strategic partnership and India has been training personnel from the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF). Given its geography, India simply cannot afford to have an exit policy in Afghanistan. As India's National Security Adviser Shivshankar Menon has recently observed, "for India, there is no end game in Afghanistan."¹⁰ India has demonstrated considerable political sagacity by declaring its support to a dialogue involving all sections of Afghanistan, including the Taliban.¹¹ In India's view, a genuine reconciliation process must be broad-based, Afghan-led and Afghan-owned, and must not undermine the legitimacy of the Afghan constitution, State and Government.¹²

The Indian leadership should clearly convey to the US that it should refrain from (once again) erroneously linking India-Pakistan relations to stabilisation in Afghanistan. It should urge the US to roll back its recent tendency to validate Pakistan's security approach, which does little to check either the strategic ambitions of the Pak military or the threat posed by extremist groups under its protective wing.

Facilitating the Iran Connection

There is an emerging ray of hope that India and the US can work on an alternative approach to address the security situation in Afghanistan. Reports of a possible thaw in relations between the US and Iran portend well for Afghanistan. Bringing the Taliban to the negotiating table is largely a tactical issue. There is a larger structural issue that needs to be addressed. Afghanistan is a landlocked state and, therefore, its

independence can be enhanced if it has greater choice in terms of access to the sea. This requires that Afghanistan should enjoy a vibrant economic engagement and fully developed connectivity networks with Iran. Given concerns about Iran's nuclear programme and the absence of diplomatic relations between the US and Iran, there may be little appetite in Washington D.C. to rope in Iran into the stabilisation of Afghanistan. Reports indicating that Iran has been interacting with, and may have even extended support to, some elements of the Taliban hardly help these prospects.¹³

However, it is not in Iran's long-term interest to have a destabilised Afghanistan next door with a strong Taliban presence. An improvement in relations between Iran and the US may see Afghanistan emerging as an area of agreement between the two. In the recent past, James Dobbins has stated: "If we are able to make real progress on the nuclear agenda ... I think, objectively, Iran and American interests are, if not coincident, at least overlap significantly. Iran has historically wanted a stable, peaceful Afghanistan."¹⁴

President Obama's remarks at the UN General Assembly on September 24, 2013 have opened the door for a "different" relationship with Iran "if we can resolve Iran's nuclear programme."¹⁵ This was followed by Iranian President Hassan Rouhani's assurances at the United Nations that Iran will "remove all reasonable concerns" about its nuclear programme and will engage in "time-bound and result oriented" negotiations.¹⁶

If this trend gains momentum, Iran may well be able to play a more vigorous role for the stabilisation of Afghanistan, alongside India and the US.

Currently, Pakistan denies India transit to Afghanistan and Central Asia. To overcome this space denial, India has been exploring the possibility of developing alternative networks of connectivity, such as the Chabahar port in Iran and its connection to the Indian-built Zaranj-Delaram road in Afghanistan.

Vibrant connectivity and economic networks with all neighbouring countries may help stabilise Afghanistan and transform it from a source of anxiety to an economic hub on the "New Silk Road." However, for the present such an outcome remains a remote possibility, and the US approach towards Afghanistan will continue to agitate India-US relations as the 2014 drawdown nears.

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