

## COMMENTS

### NATO'S WITHDRAWAL FROM AFGHANISTAN AND THE REGIONAL SECURITY DYNAMICS

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Predicting what is going to happen in Afghanistan is a hazardous and perilous business primarily because the situation in Afghanistan is complex not only in terms of the number of actors involved within Afghanistan, but also because the conflict in Afghanistan is deeply embedded in regional dynamics. Also there is lack of genuine information about what is going on in Afghanistan. Some of the available information is reliable, some is not reliable. And then of course we have this very interesting phenomenon of plausible deniability, that is pursuit of policies by covert means. It could be any state not necessarily Afghanistan's immediate neighbours. In international politics, countries pursue a *de jure* policy and a *de facto* policy so one is little bit confused whether to focus on the actual policies or to go by the rhetoric. In this regard we should remember that the situation in Afghanistan is in a state of flux. So we are trying to make some sense of an evolving situation and that itself is a hazardous undertaking. But two things are very clear amidst all this fluidity.

One is that the Americans are going to leave Afghanistan - let's make no mistake about it. However, the size of the American military presence remains a hotly debated issue. It ranges from zero option to residual support operations, to Special Forces Operations with roughly about 12000 troops, and a wide intelligence network. Second, there is a great deal of ambiguity surrounding the mission of these residual forces after the new Afghan government signs the Bilateral Security Agreement (BSA). And then the question of the legitimacy of the new government is a critical issue. So these three issues are of crucial importance.

In this paper an effort has been made to identify some of the competing and overlapping interests of the four powers in a chart. The list of the actors are in the first column and in the remaining two columns the interests and the instruments that these four countries are using or are

likely to use are mentioned. And then in the fourth column some of the factors that complicate issues are listed. The factors are most critical with regard to Afghanistan's present and future course.

### Interests, Instrumentalities and Complicating Factors

Actors	Interests	Instrumentality	Complicating factors
Pakistan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Peace and Stability</li> <li>• No preferred partner (among Afghan groups)</li> <li>• Energy, economic, trade corridor</li> <li>• Stability of Pakistan-Afghanistan border</li> <li>• Pashtuns seen as important stakeholders, need to Promote policies of ethnic balance</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Negotiated settlement</li> <li>• Work with regional partners</li> <li>• Build pipelines</li> <li>• Effective border management</li> <li>• Leverage geography and interests of external players</li> <li>• Work with existing political dispensation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Presence of peace spoilers</li> <li>• Vested interest around Afghan conflict (mafias, criminal gangs with transnational links).</li> <li>• Civil and military consensus or otherwise</li> <li>• Wanting influence over proxies (generational change)</li> </ul>
China	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Peace and development</li> <li>• Insulate itself against negative influences (flow of arms into Xinjiang)</li> <li>• Seek access to Afghan minerals at affordable cost.</li> <li>• Limited and cautious engagement</li> <li>• Support development of economic corridor</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Support regional dialogue using SCO as a key forum</li> <li>• Work with Pakistan to promote negotiated settlement of the Afghan conflict</li> <li>• Support multilateral efforts to promote peace and development</li> <li>• Work with Russia to stabilize Afghanistan</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Limitations of SCO</li> <li>• Rival influences of other competing powers (mainly India).</li> <li>• Neutrality and limited engagement will encourage others to become more assertive</li> <li>• Waning American interest</li> <li>• Limited Chinese ability to produce favourable outcomes</li> <li>• In the absence of proxies China has to deal with government of the day</li> </ul>
India	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Efforts to stop the Taliban's return to power</li> <li>• Maintain and expand its area of influence</li> <li>• Protect Indian investment in the social sector</li> <li>• Undermine Pakistan's influence</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Bolster the Afghan security forces as a countervailing force to the insurgents</li> <li>• Work with other interested parties, except Pakistan, to stabilize Afghanistan</li> <li>• Use Afghanistan as a proxy to destabilize Pakistan</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Rivalry with Pakistan</li> <li>• Lack of geographical contiguity</li> <li>• Efforts to destabilize Pakistan could provoke a serious backlash including Pakistan support for insurgencies in NE India and Kashmir</li> <li>• Meddling in Afghanistan is dangerous as proven by</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide alternate access to Afghanistan to warm water ports through Iran</li> <li>• Work with the US to consolidate its sphere of influence in Afghanistan</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Strengthen anti-Pakistan orientation of Afghan security forces</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>historical events</li> <li>• Afghan Taliban cannot be marginalized</li> </ul>
Iran	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To stop the Taliban's return to Power</li> <li>• Promote and consolidate Iran's Influence</li> <li>• Reduce American influence in Afghanistan</li> <li>• Work with the forces of the former Northern Alliance to stabilize Afghanistan</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use money and arms to buy influence</li> <li>• Deepen engagement with non-Pashtun Persian speaking elements and the Hazara community</li> <li>• Work with India to stabilize Afghanistan</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Competition with Pakistan</li> <li>• US military presence in Afghanistan</li> <li>• Outflow of drugs from Afghanistan</li> <li>• The danger of arousing Pashtun ire</li> </ul>

### Pakistan's interests

Pakistan's interests are: Peace and stability, elections, governance and the Afghan peace process. A number of statements on these matters have been issued by Pakistan's policy makers. Unlike in the past, Pakistan does not now have preferred partners. This is a fundamental change in Islamabad's stance, at least in terms of its rhetoric. Previously, the rhetoric in Islamabad was that unless the Pashtuns who are the largest ethnic community in Afghanistan, are given their due share in power, peace cannot be achieved. According to some estimates their share in the total population of Afghanistan is 40%, some people put it at 55%. Nevertheless, Pakistan had taken it upon itself to support the Pashtun's share in power, which is no longer the case. Then there is the issue of stability of the Pakistan-Afghanistan border. This is one of the most important issues for Pakistan. There are mechanisms already in place but there is definitely a marked absence of political will on both sides, to make these arrangements work.

And another point to remember is that the Pashtuns are important for maintaining the ethnic balance in Afghanistan. Many people may not like

the Pashtun-dominated Taliban's to return to power. But many among Pakistan's policy makers still believe that without the Pashtuns being given a modicum of share in the future dispensation of power, Afghanistan will not be able to achieve stability.

#### *Instrumentalities*

Pakistan has been trying to negotiate a settlement in Afghanistan and work with the regional partners. The desire to build gas pipelines, and effective monitoring of Pakistan's western border are manifestations of this approach. Leveraging its location and enticing other powers aligned with it, especially China, to stabilize Afghanistan appears to be the overarching approach. Working with the emerging Afghan political dispensation would involve the forging of interdependence and that would give Kabul the incentive to adopt cooperative policies for ensuring that Afghanistan does not descend into chaos and more violence. This is a significant departure from the previous Pakistani approach towards Afghanistan which was largely centered on its support for the Taliban government. In the absence of such a scenario Pakistan is likely to work on these instruments.

#### *Complicating factors*

What are the complicating factors in Afghanistan's present situation which can affect Pakistan's interests? These relate to what could be called the growing clout of "peace spoilers". There are a number of actors who want to promote peace in Afghanistan but we also know that there are peace spoilers as well. Who are these peace spoilers? They essentially are those vested interests that have arisen in the milieu of the prolonged conflict in Afghanistan. Let us not forget that ever since the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979, Afghanistan has been in a state of perpetual civil war, with varying degrees of external involvement. As a result of this prolonged and protracted conflict in Afghanistan, mafias and criminal gangs have flourished with their transnational linkages. So the new government in Kabul will have to either accommodate these powerful elements or challenge them, which is going to be a huge problem.

Of course, Islamabad's ability to pursue its goals in Afghanistan involves the issue of civil-military relations in Pakistan. Are civilian and military segments of the Pakistani establishment in Agreement on the Afghan policy or not? That is the key question. The other complicating factor for Pakistan will be a generational change in the Afghan military commanders and

insurgent groups. Taliban leader Mullah Umbar is history, but he has symbolic power that he can deploy to influence those who are part of, or allied with his group. But there are new field commanders who are now in charge. They are the people who have been waging the insurgency against the Americans for the past 12 or 13 years. No country has a definitive idea on how to control these forces. Left chucked and to their own devices, these forces can easily become peace spoilers.

### **China's Interests**

Moving on to the People's Republic of China; very briefly China professes to pursue peace and development and is very keen to insulate itself from the negative political influences and the influx of arms in Xinjiang. Those who follow China would have noticed that recently the National Commission on Security was set up by the Chinese president and one of the areas of responsibility for this Commission is to manage security in Xinjiang. This means that tackling unrest in Xinjiang (which Beijing defines as the three evils of extremism, terrorism, and separatism) is now officially part of the national security doctrine of China. The country's other major interest is to seek access to Afghan minerals at affordable cost. The Chinese are active in a number of development projects, but that activism is driven by purely commercial considerations. The Chinese are interested in exploiting commercial opportunities in Afghanistan but they are not prepared to pay a huge security cost. While China seeks to extend its business interests in Afghanistan it would shy away from getting entangled in the security situation after the drawing down of American forces from Afghanistan. Recently, there have been reports in the press that the Chinese have actually suspended their operations in the copper mine area where they have invested up to US\$3 billion. Thus the Chinese are seeking limited and less costly engagement in Afghanistan and they support the development of an economic corridor which fits in well with the Chinese objectives in Pakistan also.

### *Instrumentalities and complicating factors*

China supports a regional dialogue using the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) as a key forum, to promote a negotiated settlement of the Afghanistan conflict. Pakistan would be part of this dialogue. Using SCO as a forum would mean that Russia too would participate in the negotiations on Afghanistan. Russia has been concerned about the flow of arms to the Central Asian states which it considers as its "near abroad."

Moscow is extremely concerned about the smuggling of drugs from Afghanistan into Russia and therefore encourages the Central Asian governments to take strong measures to stop the smuggling into their countries of opium and heroin and all kinds of contraband drugs from Afghanistan. An important competing power of China in Afghanistan is India. While the Chinese exhort that all regional powers limit their involvement in Afghanistan, they will have to become more assertive as other regional powers become proactive. The Chinese have limited ability to influence the outcome of the conflict as they do not have proxies working Afghanistan. In the absence of proxies, China per force has to deal with the government of the day.

### **India's Interests**

A lot has been written and said about India. It appears that India will work very hard to stop the Taliban's return to power, for they fear that their return to power would mean an end to heavy Indian investment in Afghanistan's infrastructure and its security presence in Afghanistan. India also wants to maintain and expand its area of influence, protect Indian investment in the social sector which according to latest estimates is worth over \$3 billion. India also actively seeks to reduce Pakistan's influence in Afghanistan. This has been the basic objective of Indian foreign policy in Afghanistan. More importantly, one of the ways for India to reduce Pakistan's influence in Afghanistan is to provide alternate access to Afghanistan for reaching the sea through Iran. If one looks at Indian infrastructure projects in Afghanistan it can be seen that they are building road networks that directly link Afghanistan to the Iranian port of Chahbahar. Moreover, India would work with the US to consolidate its area of influence in Afghanistan.

### *Instrumentalities*

The instruments available to India are: bolstering Afghanistan's security forces as a countervailing force against insurgents, and work with other states except Pakistan, to stabilize Afghanistan. India also does not hesitate to use Afghanistan as a proxy state to de-stabilize Pakistan. Even though there is no direct hard evidence of India's links with insurgents groups in Pakistan, there is considerable circumstantial evidence which substantiates Pakistani claims that the Indians are using Afghanistan as a proxy state to de-stabilize Pakistan.

Strengthening anti-Pakistan and pro-Indian orientation of the Afghan security forces is another instrument being used by India. In this regard, the Indians have focused on the people working in important positions in the Afghan intelligence and security apparatus.

#### *Complicating factors*

The key complicating factor for India is obviously its rivalry with Pakistan. India's lack of geographical contiguity with Afghanistan puts it at a huge disadvantage as compared to Pakistan, which has a very long border with Afghanistan. Not having a common border with Afghanistan also has an advantage for India. New Delhi can claim that since India does not share a border with Afghanistan it is in no position to play the proxy game. There are however costs attached to this approach. Efforts to de-stabilize Pakistan could easily provoke serious backlash from Pakistan, which could include support for the insurgency in North East India and the uprising in Kashmir. Seen in the historical context, meddling in Afghanistan too much can become problematic. It is a well-known that Afghanistan is reputed to be the graveyard of empires, and conventional wisdom warns against involvement in the country. The Afghan Taliban cannot be marginalized for too long. However hard India may try to shape the future of Afghanistan to its liking, it would not be able to maintain enduring influence in Afghanistan.

#### **Iran's role in Afghanistan**

Iran does not want the Taliban's return to power. Its key objective is to promote and consolidate its influence and work with the non-Taliban forces to achieve this goal. Iran has used money and arms to buy influence in Afghanistan. There have been several credible reports, including Karzai's admission that he had received bags full of money from his Iranian friends. After the draw down of American forces from Afghanistan, Iran would seek deeper engagement with non-Pashtun Persian speaking elements and the Hazara community. It would also prefer to work with India to stabilize Afghanistan.

#### *Complicating factors*

Iran faces several challenges in the context of Afghanistan. These may be summarized as competition with Pakistan, the US military presence in Afghanistan and the danger of arousing Pashtun anger.

**Conclusion**

So this in summary form is this author's assessment of what these four regional actors are trying to do. What follows are some conclusions drawn from the preceding discussions. Border management and border security is critical. The three countries, namely Iran, Pakistan and Afghanistan have to work out a system to manage their common borders as contiguous states; this is most essential for achieving peace and stability in Afghanistan.

Afghanistan's neighbours would be inevitably affected by developments in Afghanistan. All these players have direct stakes in Afghanistan's stability, but because of these stakes they are unable to leave Afghanistan alone. This is a classical dilemma. For a state with contiguous borders with another state, a non-interference, non-intervention policy is most desirable. But the growing influence of rival powers often hinders the pursuance of such a policy. So non-interference is not a viable option in this case. The most worrisome aspect of the scenario in Afghanistan is the absence of a dialogue to address regional concerns. Though other commentators may disagree, this author believes that in the absence of a regional consensus on the stabilization of Afghanistan, the situation has been complicated by an inside-outside dynamics: what happens in Afghanistan will have a regional fallout and vice versa.