

Afghanistan beyond 2014

Quest for a New Policy

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Analysing the political conditions inside Afghanistan, this article looks at the challenges before the new regime in Afghanistan. Further, it looks at the increasing influence of the Loya Jirga and analyses the strategic implications for India and south Asia. India's policy towards Afghanistan seems to be shifting, with the Taliban gaining in strength after the presidential elections which have still not decided the winner.

The United States (us) Secretary of State, John Kerry issued his first statements after the Loya Jirga concluded its deliberations on a Bilateral Security Agreement (BSA) to be signed between Afghanistan and the us. He called for paying heed to the wishes of Afghan people, who had sent their leaders to this historical institution that has surpassed the significance of Wolesi Jirga, or the elected Lower House of the Afghan Parliament. The Loya Jirga was called by President Karzai between 21 and 24 November 2013 to delve into the implications and concerns of the pact, which the Loya Jirga overwhelmingly approved for signing before the year ending 2013.¹

President Karzai gave a runaround to the Americans by introducing his new set of demands, who were hoping to ink the pact after the overwhelming support of Jirga. He announced that the pact would be signed only after the 2014 presidential and provincial elections. The Americans found his demands perplexing, as he demanded an end to us forces entering houses of Afghan residents, ensuring "fairness" in 2014 elections and third, for "sincere" support in talks with the Taliban. They were baffled as they could not mean less than what Karzai meant from his last two demands.

The Doha initiative was one of the tireless efforts by the us to bring across the table, the Afghan government and the Taliban released from Guantanamo and Pakistan. President Karzai too had to face the pre-election political heat due to his style of functioning that came under criticism from domestic quarters. It was Karzai's attempt to bypass the Lower House of the Afghan Parliament and appoint a replacement for Independent Election Commission (IEC) chief, Fazil Ahmed Manawi that invited widespread criticism in April 2013.² It also reminds of the 2011 embroglio when Special Election Tribunal (SET) had disqualified parliamentarians

for fraudulent practices, but were reinstated through the presidential decree issued by Karzai in August 2011. It created suspicion between Karzai and the us, who professed that the law must be housed in institutions rather than individuals.

The Loya Jirga discussed the sensitive issue of us forces making night raids and asked in the draft, which was rechristened Security and Defence Agreement (SDA) to add the term "respect Islamic values" as part of the protocol for all search behaviour (Clark 2013). The president roped in the issue of peace talks with Taliban to be guaranteed by the us after not being able to impress upon Loya Jirga, which pointed out that the us has agreed to all procedural protocols demanded by Afghans.

The Quetta Shura Taliban issued a statement condemning Loya Jirga for an all-out selling of Afghan interests under the BSA (Moreau and Yousafzai 2013). They said that the continued presence of "infidel" forces on Afghan soil will sustain jihad forever. The jihadists from all over the Muslim world would descend upon Afghanistan for enraging battle against the Americans, they added. The conflict of interest became glaringly visible when the chairman of Loya Jirga, Sibghatullah Mojaddedi, almost denounced Karzai's irredentism and threatened to emigrate in the wake of failure to secure the deal. There has been quite wide acknowledgement of President Karzai's growing displeasure with the us as the 2014 hustings approached. Karzai accused the us of attempting to compromise the sovereignty of Afghanistan after the failure of the us's Doha initiative.

Aftermath of Doha

The intention to talk peace with Taliban was conspicuous when Karzai signed the National Stability and Reconciliation Bill in March 2007. The June 2010 Peace and Consultative Jirga declared a resolution to constitute the High Peace Council (HPC) for the said purpose. Peace talks received big blow when its chief Ustad Rabbani was assassinated by the Taliban in September 2011. The Taliban has been clear on two fronts; first, they would not accept any authority talking superior to them, not even the Constitution of Afghanistan. Islam is the only superior authority to

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whom they would listen to. Second, they believe it is the natural right of the Pashtuns to govern the country. Hence, any non-Pashtun leadership is to be seen as an adversary by them and they have repeatedly gone after their lives by deploying suicide bombers. According to Robert D Crews, Osama bin Laden identified two jihadi targets for Taliban, namely, us troops and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Afghanistan (Crews and Amin 2009: 240). The first being the infidel force opposed to Islam and second, being dominated by Tajiks, Hazaras and Uzbeks opposed to Pashtun dominance.

Karzai is not abhorrent to the Taliban, who dominate southern Afghanistan and he finds them worthy allies to strike a balance vis-à-vis northern Afghan political groups. But, his equations have been jinxed by the us's strategic objectives of securing permanent footing in southern Afghanistan. Doha initiative marked convergence of President Obama's Af-Pak policy launched with a surge in troops in 2009. It carefully worked for an understanding with Taliban that would reduce the propensity of land-warfare as the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) presence recedes. The Doha talks aimed at bringing Taliban leaders released from Guantanamo detention and those held in captivity by the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) in Pakistan into direct negotiation with the Afghan government.

Karzai has been apprehensive of a deal between Taliban and the us that could isolate him from his Pashtun partners in the government as the latter would desert him and join the newer coalition. He had, therefore, valid apprehensions about his interests being sidelined by the us. He chose to show his displeasure when the Taliban office opened in Doha with a status of political residency, and accused the peaceniks of compromising Afghan state interests. The Taliban refused to enter into talks unless they were allowed an identity of flag and emblem (Arash 2013).

The Taliban have been non-receptive to peace overtures from Karzai, even as they are open to talks with the us. This underscored Karzai's frustration with the Taliban leadership and the us alike to the extent that he demanded a direct action against them in the aftermath of talk

failure.³ The Doha debacle gave Karzai an opportunity to launch his initiative to engage the Taliban along with their Pakistani masters for a direct negotiation. There were not enough backers to Karzai's August 2013 overture to the newly elected Sharif government. The chief of staff Karim Khorram accused Pakistan of plotting the break-up of Afghanistan with the opening of Taliban liaison office at Doha.⁴ Sceptics like Esmael Qasimyar, a member of the High Peace Council in Afghanistan opined that Karzai had travelled to Pakistan no less than 20 times, which has invariably reneged over its pledge to support peace talks.⁵

Pakistan's relations with the Taliban essentially reflect its paranoia of the strategic depth paradigm (Rothstein and Arquilla 2012: 101). The Quetta Shura Taliban headed by Mullah Omar, is the "good" or Afghan Taliban that maintains office in Quetta, Baluchistan. These are largely Ghilzai Pashtuns who originate from Kandahar, Paktika and Zabul provinces. The Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), also known as the "bad" Taliban operates in Waziristan, Bajor and Orakzai agency and the Swat-Malakand division. Pakistan launched the Bajour and Swat-Malakand offensive in 2008 to neutralise them, however, their regular escape to the border provinces of Afghanistan created a tricky situation where Pakistan had to rely on us drone warfare to neutralise the TTP.

The good and bad of Taliban are referenced to the strategic interests of Pakistan (Amin et al 2010: 39). The Afghan Taliban is opposed to us-Pak cooperation, but they are into talks with the us, unlike their counterparts TTP, who are averse to a truce with the Pakistan state. This has created autonomous regional structures in the Taliban, now known more with district names as prefix to their identity.

The Afghan Taliban is supported by the Haqqani network based in Miramshah, North Waziristan. The Haqqanis are a crucial link between the Afghan and Pakistan Taliban. The us has been unequivocal about the Haqqani threat, but the Afghan Taliban in the aftermath of the Doha initiative had emerged as a strategic asset with a convergence of us and Pakistani interests. The externalities

of Afghan state security essentially emerge from actions of the Afghan Taliban. And, Karzai for these reasons attached great importance to striking a deal with them. However, they have not been given free-hand by Pakistan at the behest of the us.

Both the Afghan defence establishment and the Afghan Parliament have been critical of Karzai's weak-kneed policy on Taliban, and they have demanded a firm hand in dealing with Afghan Taliban and their backers. This has led to border skirmishes on the Durand line, the Af-Pak border. The capability of Afghan defence forces to defeat Afghan Taliban forces on their own is a delimiting factor for concessions during peace talks. The reports of 2013 seem to indicate that there are encouraging trends, with some major success by the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) against Taliban insurgents. Pakistan runs the risk of losing out in the bargain with the weakening of the Afghan Taliban. Therefore, the efforts have so far focused on the possibility of some form of inclusion of Taliban in the political set-up of Afghanistan. This has serious implications for democracy in Afghanistan, as several groups are unmistakably apprehensive of the Taliban resorting to their ideological practices against women and minorities.

'Not-So-Crazy' Karzai Factor

Haroun Mir (2014) wrote a piece for *The Wall Street Journal* on "How to Understand the Not-So-Crazy Karzai". President Karzai played the iconic role of defining the Afghan National Interests (ANI). And, to this effect his resistance to the signing of BSA bore significance; if and when the us failed to focus its priorities in consonance with the ANI. The agreement that forged into a closed relationship would remove scope of future renegotiation of the deal, which has been the typical safety valve for the Afghan rulers, who have been keen on retaining, while dealing with the imperial powers over the ages. The BSA follows the Strategic Partnership Agreement (SPA) signed by President Karzai and President Obama on 1 May 2012. The agreement espoused a larger ambit for securing regional security goals, preserving democratic values and socio-economic

attainments of the passing decade and institutional enhancement of governance in Afghanistan.⁶

Doha appeared to be the litmus test, which failed to convince President Karzai about the fecundity of such agreements. The partnership programme had hitherto encompassed working out strategies with NATO to support and upgrade ANSF. President Karzai did not forget that his engagement with the Obama administration had hit rock bottom at times, especially, during the 2009 presidential elections, where there were accusations of manipulation from both sides. President Karzai has one legacy, which fortunately or unfortunately his successors would not have. He often held out the olive branch to the Taliban and had reached out to them, both, in Pakistan and the United Arab Emirates. But, the Taliban have not reconciled to his authority as that would mean surrendering a key influence in southern Afghanistan. The Taliban want to monopolise the Pashtun ethno-political space second to none, not even to Karzai.

Both the second phase contestants, Abullah and Ghani do not have that inclination towards the Taliban and this is something that keeps the ethnic card under wraps in the post-2014 situation. President Karzai was able to take along different non-Pashtun ethnic groups with his supportive Pashtun tribes. This would be a geopolitical concern as Afghanistan remains susceptible to ethno-territorial resistance against the centralised Kabul authority. Both the contestants have strongly reiterated their commitments to signing the BSA as soon as either of them gets elected. The BSA has some difficult issues, which the draft in itself is incapable of handling, especially, those concerning the laws about operability of the US forces.⁷ The situation has fallibility to the immediate days of yesteryear, when the US forces advanced along with the Northern Alliance members against the Taliban in November 2001. This situation cannot be ignored as the experience shows that the presence of the US forces might render Afghan *buzkashi* far more dangerous given the ethnic balance often getting called into question on issues of security and development.

The north-south divide would be a challenge for the newly-elected president. Further it would be difficult to keep the US forces under the “stop button” before giving any go ahead to BSA. The large bait is the vast defence infrastructure that the US has in Afghanistan and huge booty of defence equipment that lies there.⁸ It can significantly alter the balance of power between Afghanistan and Pakistan. Among the game changers, the most vied are the Mine-Resistant Ambush Prevention (MRAP) vehicles, each costing around \$1 million. They have been effective against Taliban tactics of planting improvised explosive devices along the roadside.⁹ The signing of the BSA is a lucrative offer for retaining them in service of ANSF. President Karzai, sensing this, often reiterated his demand for defence equipment with India, which India politely toned down with an excuse of potential to aggravate its relations with Pakistan.

India's Policy, Post-2014

The NATO forces would be leaving Afghanistan after the elections of 2014. The US plans to retain more than 10,000 troops under its May 2012 SPA signed by Obama and Karzai in Washington.¹⁰ The crux of the pact is the nature and amount of military assistance provided to Afghanistan. The SPA allows either of the parties to opt out of it with one year's notice. The ANSF require constant material and training support, which would be the key component post-2014. It has been much to the chagrin of the US, which has repeatedly pointed to the negative impact of corruption of the security framework of Afghanistan. The attacks of “green on blue” have been one of the worst nightmares for the foreign trainers; 2012 saw more than 61 casualties on this account, the highest since the 2001 invasion of Afghanistan.¹¹

A major source of this friction is the tribal kinship network that remains a vital source for power for warlords. These networks are exploited by the Taliban or rogue warlords for subterfuge. The US would wish to see a decline in state patronage to warlordism in the aftermath of 2014 elections, seemingly more from Abdullah in case he wins. United Nations data of 2013 shows a marked increase in

opium production in southern Afghanistan (Bowman 2013). It points to the growing influence of warlords and alternative forms of governance defeating the very purpose of democracy. And, the degree of democracy might represent a sufficient divide between north and south Afghanistan, if the warlordism helps the post-Karzai president in securing much-desired influence in the aftermath of 2014 elections. For the time being, the Loya Jirga seems to be the binding arrangement between the fractious polity that is being tenaciously held under the garb of constitutionalism and state security guaranteed by international forces.

The former US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton spoke of “red-lines” to be observed while talks with Taliban on reconciliation were to move forward (Crawford 2011). Renunciation of violence, repudiation of all Al-Qaeda linkages and respect for the Afghan Constitution have been the cardinal demand. The Doha process liquidated the “renunciation and respect” clauses, while the repudiation clause was retained. India has been piqued by the negative impact of these adjustments of Afghan democracy and political pluralism. India would have to secure a firm footing among those Pashtun groups, who stand for political pluralism and are averse to Taliban-like monopolising of state power. India has gained immensely with the personal rapport of President Karzai, and would wish that his legacy is retained by the newly-elected president. The nationalist character of ANSF is vital to secure Afghanistan from fractious ethnic polity and India's contribution to that would be vital. The BSA must not be a restraint, but an enabler to Afghanistan's capability of engaging with its neighbours, especially, India.

India has been focusing on humanitarian assistance in Afghanistan, which must be emboldened with more infusion of resources. Poverty is one of the major reasons the Taliban are there to stay as destitution makes the poor move to Pakistan in search of livelihood and they are, in the process, exposed to the jihadi influences. The good relation with US is an important factor in driving this malignancy out of the lives of Afghans. The newly-elected president has to look at the Taliban factor and the

us's presence from this perspective. According to UN estimates of the total population of 33 million, nearly 55% of Afghans are poor and nearly 45% unemployed. State's intervention in Afghanistan's economy and society is the key to solve the poverty puzzle and to this effect aid has to be channelised through state organs with desired accountability on their part.

India has undertaken construction of the Afghan Parliament that is iconic of its support from the largest democracy for the newest democracy. Indian assistance to Afghanistan has received accolades from all sections of Afghan society, except from extremist groups like Hizb-i Islami. Therefore, the declining role of the Afghan Parliament and the ascendancy of a traditional institution like the Loya Jirga is a cautionary sign of possible twists and turns that India might face in its Afghan policy. It was, therefore, not surprising to see a possible policy shift in the offing when India issued a visa to a former Taliban member, Mullah Abdul Salam Zaeef, who was, at one time, a close confidante of Mullah Omar.¹² It has been a major detour since the Kandahar fiasco in 1999, which led the Indian establishment to harden its policy on religious and extremist groups including the Taliban. The present move is aimed to gain some influence with the Afghan Taliban, which might have a share in the power arrangement after the 2014 elections.

India's presence in Afghanistan has been consistently targeted by the Haqqani network and the Hizb-i Islami cadre, who largely carry out ISI's mandate. The attack on the Herat Consulate in May 2014 was clearly pointed out by President Karzai to be the handiwork of a Lashkar outfit and its timing coincided with the assumption of office by the newly-elected Modi government.¹³ India would need to look for options of internal and external multilateralism. The ethnic and north-south divide might grow as a consequence of Taliban accommodation. Therefore, India needs to take a prudent call when striking accords with the Taliban. It is in India's interest that they should keep the Haqqanis, Al-Qaida and of late, the Lashkar outfits at bay. There is a need to diversify partnership by seeking suitable policy operatives with Iran, China and Russia too.

The Jirga is looking for a greater degree of state coalition through signing of the BSA. At the same time, any rapprochement between India and Pakistan also directly contributes to the spirit of the Loya Jirga. So far, there remains an essential disconnect between the two and remain stymied due to Pakistan's military establishment. A case may be in the offing where the new president might look into the matter of perceived Indo-Pak rivalry for influence in Afghanistan and seek concessions from both parties in lieu of their presence in Afghanistan. This might result in possible shrinkage of Indian consular presence in Afghanistan, and at the same time an increase in counter-insurgency operations in the Af-Pak region. Pakistan has volatility at both the Durand Line and the Line of Control with India, which makes India and Afghanistan common strategic partners against threats emanating from Pakistan. This only strengthens the mandate for the us in the Af-Pak region, and their growing partnership with India that could raise the stakes for securitisation in south Asia.

NOTES

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