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A NATION TORN: AFGHANISTAN CRISIS AND FUTURE IMPLICATIONS

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Exercise Solo Flight

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A NATION TORN: AFGHANISTAN CRISIS AND FUTURE IMPLICATIONS

The Afghanistan-Pakistan (Af-Pak) region has become the new theater of war that has been divided by the Durand line. On to the West of this line, lies Afghanistan, where NATO and other forces are conducting anti-terrorist and counter-insurgency operations, and on to the East, lies the sovereign territory of Pakistan where international terrorist move with impunity.¹ Both these nations have entered the lexicon of geopolitics, synonymous to terror and a primary fronts for the global war on terrorism. The region today stands at the crossroads of war and peace where an endless struggle is underway. The *Taliban* is firmly entrenched, threatening security in the tribal areas and meting out Sharia-influenced justice.² Pakistan's state writ continues to be weak in its own tribal areas with the Pakistani army still struggling to consolidate its zones of influence. The region remains mired in turmoil, political instability and disorder. With the Obama Administration's announcement to pull out its troops by Dec 2014 not becoming a reality and the recent dropping of 'Mother-of -all-bombs', USA's 'war of necessity' in Afghanistan may not be drawing to a close.³

There is no regional consensus on an approach to the present situation. While the Americans hope to exit with honour, seeking to leave in the wake, an established order, others have different interests in the region - Pakistan yearning for control and strategic depth; Iran desiring American forces out of its backyard; China eyeing Afghan resources

¹ Collins, Joseph J. *Understanding War in Afghanistan*. Washington, 2011.

² Goodhand, Jonathan and Sedra, Mark. *The Afghan Conundrum: Intervention, Statebuilding and Resistance*. Routledge, 2015.

³ Eehart, Hans-Georg and Pentland, Charles C. *The Afghanistan Challenge: Hard Realities and Strategic Choices*. McGill-Queen's University Press, Kingston, 2009.

without any definite commitment to security and stability in the region and Russia remaining interested but passive after its Afghan expedition.⁴

As the speculation surrounding Afghanistan and Pakistan future is rife, this paper aims to unravel the mystery of this region by analyzing the fault lines, the various possible future scenarios and their implications on the global order.

Fault Lines

History of Afghanistan has been mired in conflict. The Soviet invasion in 1979 sowed the seeds of present day conflict, when large number of Soviet troops landed in Kabul and seized all important installations.⁵ This led to the rise of Afghan *Mujahideen* who allegedly with US support started an Islamic resistance. The Soviet withdrawal in 1988 created a power vacuum with far reaching effects on Afghanistan. It resulted into a civil war and total anarchy with provinces commandeered by local warlords jostling for power and space.⁶ In reaction to anarchy and warlordism, a movement of former mujahideen mostly Pashtuns who were educated in *madarssas* of Pakistan surfaced.⁷ They removed warlords, provided order and imposed strict form of Islam in the country. In 1994 they captured Kandahar, by end-1998 occupied about 90% of the country and in September 1996, established their government in Kabul.⁸

Although US formally did not recognize Taliban government, it initially accepted it with the hope that peace would be restored.⁹ However, the 9/11 attacks changed the

⁴ Goodson, Larry P. *Afghanistan Endless War: State Failure, Regional Politics, and the Rise of the Taliban*. University of Washington Press, 2001

⁵ Tanner, Stephen. *Afghanistan: A Military History from Alexander the Great to the Fall of the Taliban*. DA Capo Press, 2002.

⁶ *ibid*

⁷ Collins, Joseph J. *Understanding War in Afghanistan*. Washington, 2011.

⁸ *ibid*

⁹ Rotberg, Robert I. *Building a new Afghanistan*. Massachussetts, 2007.

global situation profoundly and resulted in the US-led “Global War on Terrorism’. However, in spite of overarching military might, the war against Taliban has refused to be drawn to an acceptable conclusion. The Afghan polity has remained fractured in its socio-political fabric and it has opened avenues for exploitation by vested interests.¹⁰ It is pertinent to assimilate a brief background of the major fault lines confronted by the region.

Political Fault Line. State building has passed through a number of phases in Afghanistan. The period after the withdrawal of Soviet Union has witnessed a larger struggle along the ethnic orientation dominated by *Mujahideen* and *Taliban*.¹¹ The politics has not only succumbed to the ethnic divide but also has been influenced by economic and social fragmentation. History bears testimony to the fact that a number of major and minor political players have played as proxies to various interested parties, some of them even from outside the region.

Ethnic Fault Line. This fissure is fundamental to all the conflicts witnessed by the history books. Any major change in the region is certain to go through the furnace of this seemingly most unmistakable but omnipresent menace.

Ideological Fault Lines. Ethnic conflicts have dominated the politics in Afghanistan however they are not the root cause of state collapse. The ideological divide instead has been the reason for downfall of more regimes. The country was divided by an unresolved conflict between the modernizing elites in Kabul and the country's more conservative

¹⁰ Smith, Scott, Yusuf, Moeed and Cookman, Colin. Getting it Right in Afghanistan. Washington, 2013.

¹¹ Tanner, Stephen. Afghanistan: A Military History from Alexander the Great to the Fall of the Taliban. DA Capo Press, 2002.

rural inhabitants.¹² The modernizers have tried to change the country through decree but foolishly underestimated the capability required to achieve the anticipated end state. The military strength and administrative capacity needed was always insufficient, thus causing major upheavals in this region.

Economic Turmoil. West of Durand Line, the Afghan economy is highly dependent on farming and rearing of livestock.¹³ Poppy, with all its negatives, is still grown in large areas. Local industry has suffered due to long wars and the economy now hinges on foreign aid. Economic divide runs deep in the society and is even reflected in regional fabric. Even after more than 10 years of international assistance, the economic scenario in Afghanistan remains dismal.¹⁴

Conflicting Interests. The AF-PAK region is poised for major changes. The US will endeavour to safeguard its medium and long term interests despite force withdrawal. The US has invested much in Afghanistan in terms of resources including human capital and finance to turn its back on the region entirely.¹⁵ Other major regional powers such as Russia, China and India also have their own interests in the shaping of events. Pakistan continues to view Afghanistan through the prism of strategic depth and will have greater space to influence the occurrences post ISAF withdrawal, partial as it may be.¹⁶

¹² Goodson, Larry P. *Afghanistan Endless War: State Failure, Regional Politics, and the Rise of the Taliban*. University of Washington Press, 2001.

¹³ Collins, Joseph J. *Understanding War in Afghanistan*. Washington, 2011.

¹⁴ Dobbins, James F. *After the Taliban : Nation-Building in Afghanistan*. Washington, 2008.

¹⁵ Goodhand, Jonathan and Sedra, Mark. *The Afghan Conundrum: Intervention, Statebuilding and Resistance*. Routledge, 2015.

¹⁶ Crews, Robert D and Tarzi, Amin. *The Taliban and the Crisis of Afghanistan*, Harvard University Press, London, 2008.

Scenario Building

Scenario 1 - Taliban as a coalition partner in the elected government of Afghanistan

Afghanistan has successfully completed their elections with a multi-party coalition government that has assumed power to include *Taliban* as a political party. The Western and regional powers for the sake of their stability and economic interest in the region leverage their influence on Pakistan to accept *Taliban* as a coalition partner.¹⁷

Pre -Conditions for such a scenario. The necessary pre-condition for such a scenario to evolve are:-

- (a) Constitutional Amendments in the Afghan Constitution which registers a political party with religion as an agenda.
- (b) Reconciliation process between Afghan Government (Afghan High Peace Council) and *Taliban* is successful with *Taliban* agreeing to join the political scene through release of *Taliban* detainees by Pakistan.
- (c) Regional and international players leverage their influence with Pakistan to accept partial power sharing agreement between *Taliban* and the Afghan Polity for regional stability and economic interest.
- (d) *Taliban* agrees to a cease fire and joins the democratic process as a political party.

¹⁷ Goodhand, Jonathan and Sedra, Mark. *The Afghan Conundrum: Intervention, Statebuilding and Resistance*. Routledge, 2015.

- (e) Presence of ISAF in select bases in Afghanistan with necessary status of forces agreement providing them immunity from prosecution by local judiciary.

Analysis of the Scenario.

- (a) The present constitution of Afghanistan does not permit parties to have military aims and affiliation with foreign parties/ agencies/ government.¹⁸ The constitutional hurdles in conferring the status of a political party to *Taliban* will have to be circumvented.
- (b) The main reasons as to why this reconciliation will fail to integrate *Taliban* into main stream politics are firstly, vested interests of Ashraf Ghani and his government to marginalise the leadership of these extremist groups to cover up their government's failure to deliver. Secondly the *Taliban* and the Hekmatyar groups have realised the shallowness in the policies to actually integrate the *Taliban* into the main stream politics. The cold truth of the matter, therefore, is that there is less Afghan governmental interest in reconciling with the *Taliban* leadership than is usually believed.¹⁹
- (c) While Pakistan would prefer *Taliban* or a like-minded party in majority in government to secure its strategic ends, it would require good assurances by the

¹⁸ Rothstein, HY and Arquilla, John. Afghanistan Endgames: Strategy and Policy Choices for America's Longest War. Washington, 2012

¹⁹ Hayes, Geoffrey and Sedra, Mark. Afghanistan Transition Under Threat. Wilfred Laurier University Press, 2007.

US that Pakistan's aims would be met.²⁰ Pakistan may find the scenario to be acceptable only if it serves its strategic interests.

(d) In order for the scenario to be sustainable, it would have to be assumed that ISAF presence in either combat support role or purely a support role would be successful.

(e) It is unlikely that *Taliban* will call for a cease fire seeing the weakness of the Karzai government and the ISAF pull out.²¹

Feasibility of *Taliban* Emerging As a Political Party.

The feasibility of this scenario becoming a reality is less likely. However it is a likelihood that major political players may not agree to formally share political power with *Taliban*. In such a scenario, the *Taliban* will disassociate itself with the political process and retain its influence in the rural regions of Helmand and Kandahar and continue its opposition.²²

Scenario 2 - Taliban is completely marginalised and stable Afghan government takes control

Taliban is rendered ineffective and an effective coalition of aligned parties forms government. The anti-*Taliban* operations by US Armed Forces have led to a situation where the *Taliban* leadership has given up arms and is completely marginalised. The

²⁰ Smith, Scott, Yusuf, Moeed and Cookman, Colin. Getting it Right in Afghanistan. Washington, 2013.

²¹ Rothstein, HY and Arquilla, John. Afghanistan Endgames: Strategy and Policy Choices for America's Longest War. Washington, 2012.

²² Semple, Michael. Reconciliation in Afghanistan. Washington, 2009.

diplomatic offensive by the US and Western countries have isolated Pakistan in its support to *Taliban*, causing Pakistan to retract overt support and remain non-committal.²³

Marginalisation of *Taliban* may occur due to following developments:-

- (a) Drone strikes by coalition forces to eliminate the top leadership of *Taliban* neutralising the command structure, communications and cohesiveness leading to disintegration of *Taliban* fighters.
- (b) There is a likelihood of a division in the ranks of the *Taliban*, assassination of Mullah Omar or prominent leaders indicating willingness to end the war and support peaceful means for transition.
- (c) The regressive & oppressive actions by *Taliban* have led the civil society to force the main political parties to not accept *Taliban* in the main stream politics.

Pre- Conditions for such a scenario.

The necessary pre-condition for such a scenario to evolve are:-

- (a) Surgical strikes by ISAF forces on the *Taliban* leadership leads to elimination of hard core ideological leadership.
- (b) Dramatic change in Pakistan's perception about utility of *Taliban* for its strategic interest due to the deteriorating internal situation in Pakistan.

²³ Goodhand, Jonathan and Sedra, Mark. *The Afghan Conundrum: Intervention, Statebuilding and Resistance*. Routledge, 2015.

- (c) Afghan National Security Forces have developed enough capabilities to protect the political heartland of Afghanistan.
- (d) US & NATO leave sufficient forces post ISAF withdrawal, to assist the Afghan security forces to counter any *Taliban* threat.
- (e) Clashes between Hezb-i-Islami (Gulbuddin)/HIG & *Taliban* for retention of influence in North East Afghanistan to retain power where HIG marginalises *Taliban* to an extent to render it ineffective.
- (f) A strong counter balance in form of a rejuvenated Northern Alliance dominating the Northern areas.

Analysis of the Scenario. The above scenario is unlikely to manifest into a reality. It is unlikely that coalition forces will be able to contain the *Taliban* forces to an acceptable level. Considering the political situation in AF-PAK, the North is far from stable and is very fragmented. Historically dominant parties such as Jamaat-e-Islami, Jumbesh, and Hezb-i-Wahdat take different positions or are divided internally.²⁴ Furthermore, political parties are essentially state parasites, with strongmen who monopolize power at the provincial level and (generally) benefit economically from the system. In particular, they have no military structures independent from the Afghan National Army that would enable them to resist a *Taliban* offensive.²⁵ Considering the unstable politico-military situation which may arise after withdrawal of ISAF, it is unrealistic to believe that *Taliban* will be

²⁴ Rothstein, HY and Arquilla, John. Afghanistan Endgames: Strategy and Policy Choices for America's Longest War. Washington, 2012.

²⁵ Hayes, Geoffrey and Sedra, Mark. Afghanistan Transition Under Threat. Wilfred Laurier University Press, 2007.

rendered ineffective and Afghan political parties will be able to form a stable government in Afghanistan.

Feasibility of the Scenario Becoming a Reality. The given scenario is most unlikely due to the following reasons:-

- (a) In the short time frame by which the ISAF will withdraw, it is unlikely that they will be able to achieve complete neutralization of *Taliban* leadership. Presence of *Taliban* may not be in urban hubs, but they would continue to influence (indirect control) rural areas. The FATA and Khyber- Pakhtunkhwa region plays host to *Taliban/* Al Qaeda cause.²⁶ In the absence of any credible action by Pakistan Army and inability of US to operate East of Durand Line, it is only a matter of time before *Taliban* moves across the border and fills up the space vacated by ISAF.
- (b) It is almost improbable that Pakistan will abandon *Taliban* due to its deep rooted inhibitions with respect to India & desire to retain the strategic space in its backyard.

Scenario 3 – Taliban regains control of Afghanistan post ISAF withdrawal

The Obama Administration and several of its partner countries have completely withdrawn US military involvement in Afghanistan while continuing to build capacities

²⁶ Turse, Nick. The Case for the Withdrawal from Afghanistan. Verso, 2010.

in self-governance and security.²⁷ The view is that, Afghan stability after the transition is at risk from weak and corrupt Afghan governance and insurgent safe havens in Pakistan.

Owing to the withdrawal of the ISAF has resulted in the moral dominance of *Taliban*; it has regained control of Afghanistan by brokering truce with various warring Afghan factions.²⁸ It is also enjoying unhindered support from Pakistan in the establishment of a radical Islamic order in Afghanistan both monetarily and ideologically. Western military trainers and aid workers have left the country. The ANSF have splintered under the onslaught of *Taliban* and desertion in ranks.

Pre – conditions for a scenario of *Taliban* regaining control of Afghanistan.

- (a) Complete withdrawal of ISAF from Afghanistan, leaving a minimal strength behind which will not pose a threat to the *Taliban*.
- (b) Afghan National army divided on factional lines.
- (c) Continued support from Pakistan to the *Taliban* governance.
- (d) Effective parallel administration and governance by *Taliban* has undermined the credibility of Ghani government.
- (e) Complete breakdown of US backed system of governance with forced implementation of radical Islamic rules.

²⁷ Turse, Nick. The Case for the Withdrawal from Afghanistan. Verso, 2010.

²⁸ Rothstein, HY and Arquilla, John. Afghanistan Endgames: Strategy and Policy Choices for America's Longest War. Washington, 2012.

- (f) Successful reconciliation between various warring factions in Afghanistan with respect to rule of *Taliban* and eroding public support to a corrupt government.
- (g) Altered strategies of insurgents focussing on insider attacks and high profile operations.
- (h) Support from other stake holders like the fading Al Qaida, The Haqqani faction (with backing by the ISI), The Hekmatyar faction (with its one foot in the political process in coalition with *Taliban*), the Pakistani *Taliban* (Tehrik-e-*Taliban* Pakistan or TTP) vying to facilitate the transiting into Afghanistan of Afghan *Taliban* and supporting the Afghan *Taliban* goals of recapturing Afghanistan and last but not the least IS.²⁹

Analysis of the Scenario. *Taliban* is likely to set in post ISAF withdrawal. Factionalism & the related problem of security force fragmentation on ethnic lines will be the two biggest challenges that Afghanistan would face.³⁰ Sustainance of an elected government is unlikely without external support. Return of *Taliban* is likely to lead to a civil war being fought on ethnic lines.

The attitude of the Afghan public might be a factor for those international forces that remain in Afghanistan. Insurgent forces have always used the presence of foreign forces as a rallying and recruiting point, but the vast bulk of Afghans have, in surveys,

²⁹ Goodhand, Jonathan and Sedra, Mark. *The Afghan Conundrum: Intervention, Statebuilding and Resistance*. Routledge, 2015.

³⁰ Semple, Michael. *Reconciliation in Afghanistan*. Washington, 2009.

generally supported having foreign forces to secure Afghanistan. Yet, there are growing signs that the public facilitation of foreign forces is losing fervour thus allowing regional tribal and ethnic factions to take control.³¹

Afghanistan's economy and sources of financing the government in Kabul are likely to be challenged in the backdrop of factional conflicts in an anarchical future. The under mentioned steps needs reiteration for future of AF-PAK region in order to negate the return of *Taliban*:-

- (a) Constitution of integrated cells of Officers, Diplomats, aid Officials and analysts into a Provisional Reconstruction Teams(PRT) to travel around AF-PAK region for granular understanding of the local conflicts that are presently driving the war in AF-PAK region and are likely to continue post ISAF withdrawal.³² These cells are also to systematically map factional conflicts down to the local level and incorporate this info into planning for post ISAF withdrawal.
- (b) Assistance in terms of financing, investment, infrastructure development, training and technical expertise to further train and advise Afghan Forces for at least ten more years.
- (c) Cooperation with allies and regional stake holders.
- (d) Reintegration and reconciliation with militants.

³¹ Smith, Scott, Yusuf, Moeed and Cookman, Colin. Getting it Right in Afghanistan. Washington, 2013.

³² Collins, Joseph J. Understanding War in Afghanistan. Washington, 2011.

Feasibility. Among other eventualities, it is most likely that *Taliban* will regain greater control in Afghanistan with the exit of ISAF. It is likely that the dominant players organised on tribal lines will control their strongholds by use of violence and terror.³³ Discovery of mineral resources and the economics of the same are likely to lead to factionalism and lack of regard to established government set up and law of the land.

Afghanistan: Unfolding Strategic Horizon

Majority of ISAF and NATO forces deployed in Afghanistan are scheduled to leave shortly. Those remaining will likely be in non-combat roles with exception of Special Forces who are expected to continue to be in operations. The primary responsibility for security across the country will be that of the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF).³⁴ It will be pertinent to observe if Afghan forces are able to provide the necessary security to the troubled region. The most optimistic scenario of a stable Afghanistan democratising further and moving away from *Talibanisation* depends squarely on the capacity of the ANSF to provide security to the nascent constitutional government in Kabul. There is also a possible threat of the ANSF disintegrating along ethnic lines, in case the Taliban, a predominantly Pashtun-majority entity, successfully overruns Kabul.³⁵ With the possible scenario of Taliban gaining ground post-ISAF withdrawal, the motivations and capability of young Afghan forces will be under deep scrutiny. The present desertions of ANSF and supposed mutiny of young recruits against

³³ Smith, Scott, Yusuf, Moeed and Cookman, Colin. *Getting it Right in Afghanistan*. Washington, 2013.

³⁴ Wildman, David and Bennis, Phyllis. *Ending the US War in Afghanistan: A Primer*. 2010.

³⁵ Hayes, Geoffrey and Sedra, Mark. *Afghanistan Transition Under Threat*. Wilfred Laurier University Press, 2007.

the US-led trainers poses a difficult challenge and a potent threat. It will be important that minimum level of functionality of ANSF is ensured to enable Afghan government to maintain its constitutional potency.

CONCLUSION

Afghanistan and Pakistan have been grouped together as AF-PAK, a single hyphenated geo-strategic and geo-political identity that has a geo-strategic and geo-political significance both in regional terms and in the global power games. History is testimony to the fact that the polity of this region has remained fractured in its socio-political fabric and this has opened windows of opportunity for exploitation by vested interests, be it by the internal power brokers like the *Taliban* or external influence like the NATO/ISAF. Afghan security force fragmentation on ethnic lines, poor training and lack of funds is likely to indirectly aid in return of the *Taliban*, actively supported by Pakistan. Of all the scenarios played it does indicate that *Taliban* will play a role in the future of Afghanistan either as a direct ruler of Kabul or as a political participant with a major clout on all internal and external decisions.

Whatever the complex causes, unpredictable dynamics and eventual outcomes, the long campaign and the volatile political environment in Af-Pak region will have indelible mark in the geo-political environment and security policy of the region. Post-ISAF withdrawal, the region will see the rise of *Taliban* which will have potentially deleterious policy implications for the region and the world. US as the coalition leader needs to intensify its political, economic, diplomatic and military engagements to mitigate this challenge. The paper has tried to unravel the intricate AF-PAK puzzle, crystal graze into

the possible future scenarios and suggested the possible nature of future engagement. However, how the pieces of jigsaw will fall into place is still in the realm of future. We need to mix hope with caution and continue to strive to achieve an elusive peace in this war-torn region.

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