

The New Great Instability: Afghanistan after the American Exit

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The present paper discusses about the new great instability in Afghanistan which had emerged after 2001. It builds four scenarios by looking into the impending American withdrawal from Afghanistan and states that for President Obama, a stable and democratic government is most desirable but it would prefer to leave it after building a coalition government with local actors as the US is more worried about a stable government in Afghanistan, not necessarily a democratic one. It argues that with India-Pakistan peace process in doldrums, and no signs of internal political stability in Pakistan, an impending American exit from Afghanistan, have huge implications for India, especially in Jammu and Kashmir (J&K).

History has never been kind to the Afghans, nor have the Afghans be ever kind to the History. Undoubtedly, Afghanistan has been the graveyard of many kingdoms in

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the past. From the Greeks to the Soviet Union, many empires and countries fought their last major wars across what today constitutes the Durand Line, or the Af-Pak region. Outside states could conquer this region, primarily comprising of the Pashtuns, but could never subdue them and establish a stable order that could last. Will Obama turn the history and establish order? Or will his already planned exit create more instability in the region, than how it was when the Americans entered in 2001?

Afghanistan has been studied through the lens of 'Great Game' and the 'New Great Game'. Perhaps, it is time to look into the impending instability - as it happened in the late 1980s, after the impending American withdrawal. Even, if there is, it will only be a token presence, mainly in the form of training the Afghan security forces. The fact that the negotiations between the Karzai government and the Taliban

has already begun highlights the urgency to reach an understanding as early as possible, so that the US troops could leave, with a relatively stable regime.

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History Repeats Itself, So Does Disaster

A short recap of what happened in the late 1980s, when the Soviet troops left Afghanistan is necessary to understand the implications of a similar exit by another super power. After the Geneva Conference in 1988, the Soviet Union decided to withdraw its troops from Afghanistan. The primary reason for their exit was not difficult to comprehend. The Soviet troops failed to effectively rule the country. Besides local opposition, it was American aid and the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) manipulations which bled the Soviet troops through the Mujahideen upsurge. The costs of maintaining a military presence in Afghanistan outweighed political benefits for Moscow.

When the Soviet troops left Afghanistan, an understanding was reached with Najibullah, who was the then President of Afghanistan. However, not all actors, for example the different Mujahideen factions, agreed on the political arrangement in post-Soviet Afghanistan. As a result, Najibullah was isolated and had to depend heavily on his intelligence organisation, the KHAD. The Mujahideen groups, which were united for a narrow purpose of fighting the Soviet troops, never shared a common idea of what could be the way forward. There was complete chaos and confusion.

On the other hand, after waging a proxy war through the ISI and Mujahideen, American interests in Afghanistan totally faded. The disintegration of Soviet Union further made Washington attach less importance to Afghanistan. The White House and the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) totally withdrew and left the field totally for the ISI and Pakistan to handle.

While many criticise the role of Pakistan and ISI in post-Soviet Afghanistan, hardly there was any appreciation for certain genuine concerns of Pakistan. While the movement of population, especially the refugees posed a serious economic challenge, the political instability that followed in the early 1990s absolutely baffled Islamabad. More importantly, a section within the Army and the ISI believes even today, Pakistan cannot afford to have hostile countries on both sides of its borders. The conservatives within the political, military and intelligence establishments started looking for a way out; propping up the Taliban was the result of Pakistan's search for stability and a friendly regime in Afghanistan. To be fair to Pakistan's ruling elite, none could foresee that the Taliban that they designed and executed will become a monster, unleashing a host of new political issues, with strong religious and sectarian undertones.

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sectarian undertones. What was designed to be a strategic tool became a strategic disaster for Pakistan.

What were the lessons for India, of this disaster in the 1990s? New Delhi had made huge investments in Najibullah's government. With the collapse of his government and his murder, followed by the ascendancy of Taliban, all those investments made by India came to a nought.

Does the situation in Afghanistan looks similar today, as it was during the late 1980s and 1990s? What are the calculations of Washington, Islamabad and New Delhi? Do the intelligences agencies of these three governments understand and foresee, what is likely to be the fallouts in the next decade, of what is likely to happen in the next few years, after the exit of American troops? Will the ISI be allowed once again to play a lead role in the post-American troops Afghanistan? What are likely to be Islamabad's calculations and possible interventions? And what are likely to be the fallouts and their security implications for not only Afghanistan, but also the entire region? And finally, what are likely to be the implications for India?

What after Exit? Understanding the Scenarios and Fallouts

It looks clear now, Obama's surge strategy - meaning more troops to fight insurgency in Afghanistan is not a part of prolonged war against extremism in Afghanistan, ultimately leading to the establishment of a stable and democratic government in Kabul, which is acceptable to all ethnic communities. Rather, the surge is a part of an 'exit strategy', whereby Obama is planning to get back the American troops, as early as possible. What Obama is planning to do is to use the surge, as a pressure strategy to force the Taliban to negotiate with them.

Obama's conclusions are based on what the American administration considers as realities at the ground level: first, Karzai government is unlikely to provide good governance to the people of Afghanistan, resulting in further polarisation and disappointment of Afghans, especially, the pashtuns. Second, Taliban will

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continue to garner public support, not because local population believes in them, but because of the above point – the failure of Karzai government. Third, due to the above two reasons, Taliban will continue their insurgency, as the people of Afghanistan are not supporting their government and the US in their anti-insurgency operations.

What are the options? The most desirable option is also the most arduous one – a stable and democratic Afghanistan. While it looks simple in theory and in paper, anyone who has read the history of this

Af-Pak region will understand that such a political establishment never existed in practice at the ground level. If a stable and democratic Afghanistan is the most desirable option, it also means establishing a new system of governance that never existed before. A stable democracy never existed in Afghanistan, not because the Afghans do not believe in democracy or a stable government, but because the ruling elite, never had the patience and political will to establish a stable and popular government. Successive ruling elites – local or foreign, always attempted to make use of the existing faultlines within Afghanistan, and always attempted to hand over power to one group, hoping that would lead somehow to stability and acceptance by the people.

Militarily, vis-à-vis the Taliban and al Qaeda, this option means, a long drawn war, which is highly protracted and time consuming. India has been fighting a similar insurgency in J&K and northeast, and now in the naxal affected areas. Given the nature of terrain and the lack of popular support, the counter insurgency operations in Afghanistan will take not less than two to three decades to reach its ultimate conclusion, in terms of neutralising the Taliban and al Qaeda, and winning the hearts and minds of the people.

Option 1: A Stable and Democratic Afghanistan

A stable and political Afghanistan in reality is an option that not only tests the patience of the international community, but also their political and military will. In Obama's case, to be fair to him, there are not many supporters at the international level, who are willing to support such an initiative. Every major player in Afghanistan – from Canada to Australia is looking for an easy out. Unfortunately for Obama, there is no support for a strategy that would call for political and economic investment until a stable and democratic Afghanistan emerges. Nor does Obama himself is planning to drum that support. His numerous statements during 2009, clearly indicate that he is planning

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Given the current level of troops presence in Afghanistan and their areas of operations, protecting Kabul and Kandhahar alone is an achievement. Consider the number of troops that India has deployed in Kashmir valley and India's northeast. It is believed, that in J&K alone, there are more than 400,000 to 600,000 security forces, belonging military, para-military and local police are engaged

to combat militants, who are now in three digits. Or, the international community should use complete and overwhelming force like Islamabad used in Balochistan and Colombo used in northern and eastern parts of Sri Lanka.

Option 2: Allow the Coalition of Willing to Perform and Undermine the Rhapsody of Spoilers

The second option for Obama is to allow those who are willing to build Afghanistan and undermine who is spoiling a stable and democratic Afghanistan project. While Europe is hesitant to make such an investment and do not have the necessary experience to fight the Taliban to the last, India has the military resources and the counter-insurgency experience. Unfortunately for Obama, Indian intervention needs to be calibrated, for any increased Indian input in Afghanistan will offend Pakistan, and US-Pak relations.

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Obama, despite his sound rhetoric, is unwilling to take a decisive action on those spoilers, who act against the stable and democratic Afghanistan project. Obama and his administration, like the previous one, believes Karzai is their best option. Taliban and al Qaeda, undoubtedly are the ultimate spoilers of this option. Today, the US has been prodding Karzai to negotiate with the Taliban. Understood, Obama may not be able to use enough political and military power to bring them to their knees. But what about Pakistan and Afghanistan?

Pakistan has been playing a double game since the beginning. Despite numerous statements from the highest levels on this two timing of Islamabad, Obama and the international community has not effectively plugged those who still support the Taliban and al Qaeda.

If Pakistan has to take the blame for playing a double role, Karzai has been ineffective in terms of starting a stable process of governance. His government is considered to be one of the most corrupt and inefficient. From Bush to Obama, despite numerous reports and recommendations at the international level on how to improve the governance process in Afghanistan, the American Presidents stand ineffective in terms of pressurising the Afghan bureaucracy to deliver.

Option 3: Leave Afghanistan ASAP, Don't Bother about Its Future

Third option for Obama is to leave Afghanistan immediately, irrespective of whatever has been the outcome and the level of achievements, in terms of original American objectives. This is an option available for Obama; he could very well cite the domestic problems in the US and the lack of total support for the White

House for an all out war in Afghanistan against the al Qaeda and Taliban. Numerous editorials, commentaries and letters to the Editors published in leading news papers, and research essays written by American authors will indicate that not many in the US are in favour of a total military option.

This option means accepting total failure of the US; this will not only undermine the American reputation both at global and regional levels. Especially the Muslim World will see this as a part of lack of concern by the US on Middle East. Many in the Muslim World, even among its educated elite, consider the US as a primary problem in their part of the world.

This option also means the victory of radical Islam forces; at least that is how they are likely to see the decline of American hegemony at the global level. American failure and exit in Afghanistan will only increase the resolve of the radical forces and this process will expand beyond the Middle East to include South and Southeast Asia. From Pakistan to Indonesia, including India, Bangladesh and Maldives, there is a small, but substantial presence of radical elements. Even parts of Europe, especially the United Kingdom, will witness an increased radical activity, led by the immigrants from the Muslim World. Even China, especially its Sinkiang province is likely to witness an increased activity by the radical groups. One is likely to witness new literature on how the Taliban and al Qaeda faced the great Satan and defeated it.

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Finally, this option will revive the fortunes of the Taliban and al Qaeda – both militarily and psychologically. Both Mullah Omar and Osama bin Laden will become cult figures all over the world. Inside Afghanistan, an early exit by the American troops will be seen undoubtedly as a Taliban victory and will not take more than six months to one year, for a changeover most of those who are now fighting for the Afghan government. From Governors to military leaders, many are likely to silently support the Taliban, if not openly join them. Why should they? If Taliban could defeat the US, who else could protect their interests in Afghanistan?

Option 4: Leave Afghanistan Shortly after a Building a Coalition

Fourth option is a half way house between the second and third options. Set up a target date, and reach an understanding with local actors and exit with establishing a government, which is likely to last for a couple of years at least. In short, repeat the Iraq example, with minor modifications.

This option seems to be the most likely, if one has made sense of the current developments in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Karzai has already established a Peace Council to negotiate with the Taliban; the members of this Council have been

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chosen already. There have been media reports in Pakistan, hinting secret meetings between Gen Kayani, Karzai and Huqqani faction of the Taliban facilitated by the ISI Chief. Subsequently, there was an understanding between Pakistan and Afghanistan on transit (excluding India). It is highly unlikely, that the above developments would have taken place without a tacit support by the US. The objective seems to be establishing a regime, with an understanding between Karzai and the Taliban, once the American troops leave Afghanistan.

What is Desirable and what is Acceptable?

For President Obama, the first option is the most desirable and the last one is acceptable. Undoubtedly, Obama would prefer to establish a stable and democratic government, based on what the US preaches in principle and in theory. Unfortunately, he will end up reaching an understanding with a group, which the administration prefers to call as 'moderate' if not 'good' Taliban, based on what the US practices in reality.

Obama is unlikely to get international support to pursue the first option. Obama has a serious domestic problem in pursuing the first option. Given the limitations, for Obama, last option is acceptable. Clearly, the surge is not meant to re-enter Afghanistan to boost the existing troops to fight and finish the Taliban and al Qaeda. It is a strategy aimed at pressuring the Taliban to reach an understanding by increasing the rate of attrition. The current level of military engagements is limited to select regions in select provinces.

The Search for a Moderate Taliban

Since the US wants to exit as early as possible, and Karzai government is unlikely to provide any stable governance, Obama has decided to negotiate with the Taliban. The thesis that - there exists a 'moderate' and 'good' Taliban was an outcome of this search for alternatives. Today, many in the American administration believe that within Taliban, there is a section which does not share Mullah Omar's beliefs and is willing to negotiate with the US.

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What does this search for a moderate and good Taliban mean for Afghanistan? It means there would be a regime led by Karzai and Taliban supporting the same, or vice versa. Worse, the elimination of Karzai is an option, ultimately leading to a takeover by the Taliban. The US is more worried about a stable government and not necessarily a democratic one. The question today is not whether this will take place, rather, it is how soon such a disaster will descend once again to Afghanistan?

The Kabul Conference held during mid 2010, and the Loya Jirga that Karzai assembled earlier, has almost approved the dialogue with the Taliban. Unlike the US, Karzai seems to be not bothered about who is good Taliban or otherwise. Anyone who is willing to enter into an understanding with him is a good and moderate Taliban.

Pakistan, especially its ISI has been pressurizing Karzai to reach an understanding with the Huqqani faction of the Taliban. The Huqqanis are totally under the ISI's control, unlike Mullah Omar, who may like to pursue his own strategy. Numerous meetings have taken place already between the Karzai administration and the Huqqani network.

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Karzai, though have no problem in talking to the Huqqanis, he also wishes to reach an understanding with the Quetta Shura. However, he also understands it would be beneficial for him to have an understanding with Mullah Omar and a part of coalition, than fighting him.

End of another Indian Interregnum? Implications for New Delhi

From an Indian perspective, the above developments in Afghanistan have two serious implications – immediate and long term. What should New Delhi do to protect its interests? What options are there for New Delhi to pursue?

Bye Bye Kabul?

First, is the relationship between the new establishment in Kabul and New Delhi, once the US exits. Will the new regime, led by the Taliban or supported by a moderate section of it, remain committed to Indo-Afghan relationship? Or, will this signify the end of Indian presence and investments in Afghanistan? India has made a huge political and infrastructural investment in Afghanistan today. Not only New Delhi's support to Karzai's government is complete, but also there was never an effort to look beyond him. Neither at the track-I, or at the track-II levels, there is any contact between India and Afghanistan, beyond Karzai. The remnants


of Northern Alliance still exist, but whatever contacts India has with them (if at all there is any) will remain ineffective. Nor does India have many inroads into other pashtun organisations; besides Mullah Omar, there is Hekmatyar's Hizb-e-Islami and Haqqani's network. Pakistan's ISI has links with all these three groups at varying level, and India has none. There are other social and tribal structures, and individuals; one only hopes, that India has developed some contacts with them. Besides the diminishing political role, whatever infrastructural investments (since 2001, India has contributed US \$1.3 billion) it has made so far, will come to a nought. Neither the people who are using those infrastructures, nor the roads will speak for India, in any effective manner, to make the rulers of Kabul structure their relations with New Delhi.

Will there be an Upsurge in J&K?

Secondly, and more importantly, Afghanistan will once again fall into the laps of ISI. The US knows this and is acceptable to such an eventuality. In fact, the US is using ISI's linkages with the Taliban, in its search for the moderate and good butchers/killers in Afghanistan. When the US exits, there will be a huge pashtun fighting force

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on both sides of the Durand line. Besides, the TTP, there are substantial numbers of Punjabi Taliban, mainly from the Southern districts around Multan and Bahawalpur. What will the ISI do with them? Will the ISI and Pakistan fight these battle hardened militants, ultimately leading to their elimination? Or will it rehabilitate them, and make them good Taliban and better TTP? Or will it divert these fighters into J&K, as it did in the early 1990s?

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The New Great Instability: Afghanistan after the American Exit

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