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AFGHAN NEGOTIATIONS: Fairy Tale in the Making?

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The recent spate of kidnappings and the consequent negotiations with the Taliban have raised hopes for a negotiated settlement between the Afghan government and the Taliban. However, this prospect is likely to be undermined by the complexities of the ethnic rivalries in Afghanistan and Pakistan and regional politics in South Asia.

THE KOREAN hostage crisis in Afghanistan this summer staged a breakthrough in talks with the Taliban. That the Koreans emerged out of the crisis with 21 out of their 23 aid workers unharmed signaled a renewed potential for negotiations with the “adversary”. The unfolding of the crisis raised hopes that talking with the Taliban could actually render results, envisaged both by the Afghan government and their international partners and the Taliban.

The “Taliban”

The “adversary”, contrary to popular perceptions, is not monolithic in its motives or actions. While the top tier of the Taliban comprises the ideologues - the ones aligned with the group for ideological reasons -- a majority of the members are not in the group for defending or promoting an ideology. Many are in it because they do not have alternative employment opportunities. Several are dismayed at the progress made by the government and disappointed with the unfulfilled promises that were made to them by the international community. Several others believe that they are safer working for the Taliban than with the government or the international community in Afghanistan. And many detest the presence of “infidels” in their country or are enraged with the civilian casualties resulting from coalition air-strikes. Categorizing the adversary or the potential partners in negotiations therefore poses the first big challenge that grips the negotiators. This is thus not going to be a single dialogue with one entity but multiple dialogues with multi-faceted adversaries.

Negotiating or bargaining?

Given a spate of increasingly violent attacks during the last three years, President Hamid Karzai has offered Taliban leaders senior government positions in the Afghan government in exchange for peace. Dispirited by losses at the hands of NATO bombings, the Taliban have also started to talk. Allegedly, a coalition of ten commanders in Helmand has posed three key demands from the Afghan government: a timetable for the withdrawal of foreign troops, release of all Taliban prisoners, and control over ten southern provinces.

The key basis of any negotiations is that competing positions do not necessarily translate into competing interests and that the parties on both sides of the table could explore common and overlapping interests. While the Taliban’s demands set the stage for further dialogue between the

parties, their excessiveness begs the question: Is the Taliban's focus less on principled negotiation and more on positional bargaining? This is critical because if this is positional bargaining the participants are seen as adversaries rather than partners and the goal is victory rather than an agreement.

A fairy tale in the making

The Afghan government strategy seems to create a rift within the Taliban by talking to the moderate members of the Taliban and providing them reasons to integrate within the Karzai administration. The thinking is akin to a fairy tale which reflects short-term thinking and a continued preference for quick fixes by the West in Afghanistan.

Consider this. Legitimacy is the biggest asset that the Afghan government has over its Taliban counterparts. By granting the Taliban an "equal status" and legitimising it as partners in peace, the Afghan government will not only undermine its own credibility but also open the floodgates for others. Hezb-e-Islami, Jombesh-i-Milli, Hizb-i-Wahdat are to follow suit. Not to forget, the erstwhile yet sidelined warlords and several forgotten Mujahideen warriors of the past.

Afghanistan is a multi-ethnic society. Pashtuns make up roughly 39 percent of Afghanistan's population. Tajiks, Hazaras, Uzbeks, Turkmen and Baluch are the other key ethnicities in Afghanistan. Many of these non-Pashtuns suspect that this effort towards negotiating with the Taliban is about expanding Pakistan's and pro-Pakistan Pashtuns' influence in Afghanistan. They also fear that any arrangements with the "adversaries" would sideline or undermine, or worse, exclude their role in the political process. The negotiations will thus merely change the nature of instability, as this seems a policy aimed at realignment rather than at a peace process.

Negotiations with the Taliban are aimed at bringing stability and peace to Afghanistan by integrating the Taliban into the political system. But the ethnic divisions in Afghanistan and Pakistan run deeper into tribes, clans, sub-clans, etc. Once the Taliban have officially regained power and legitimacy, they are slated to compete and fight among themselves for power. The mere fact that the Taliban are not one single entity and are instead a people grouped, though not unified, together for different and often competing interests, means that competition for power within the group is inevitable. It is the logic of power and not the power of logic that dictates events in Afghanistan.

Regional politics

Having provided over US\$ 750 million for reconstruction in Afghanistan during the last six years, India is likely to continue its efforts towards reconstruction and development in Afghanistan and foster strong ties with the Afghan government. A pro-Pakistan alliance at the cost of marginalising the northern alliance will run counter to Indian interests in Afghanistan and might jeopardise Indian-Afghan ties. This would also compromise the "great game" India continues to play along with Pakistan and Iran for exerting its own influence in Afghanistan.

Another key neighbour, Iran, a largely Shia Muslim state, will view any negotiations with the pro-Pakistan Taliban as competing with its own influence in Afghanistan. The process will be seen as similar to the one in Iraq, where the United States has turned against the Iranian-supported Shia groups it initially helped into power, and aligned itself with militias of Saddam Hussein's Sunni supporters.

As long as the non-Pashtuns along with India and Iran suspect that the negotiations have such goals, or can end up into a political miasma for them to exert their influence, they will feel obligated to ensure that these negotiations do not succeed. The escalating rhetoric of conflict over Iran's nuclear ambitions intensifies these dangers.

Conclusion

Neither a triumphant nor a feeble Taliban will have sufficient incentives to resubmit to the constraints of 2002 in the context of 2007. The Taliban have staged a comeback during the last three years and they are unlikely to regress given the mounting discontent among the population with the Afghan government. They are thus likely to continue making excessive demands under any settlement. And neither a resolute nor a humbled Afghan government with its international partners will have incentives to forgo efforts to impose those constraints of 2002 on the Taliban. The insurgency will thus continue and the room for negotiations will gradually widen. Yet, members of the Taliban will continue to seek greater power at the expense of others in the group and will make the task of negotiations more complicated, if not altogether daunting. Like it or not, that is the way forward. As we enter the seventh year of the start of Operation Enduring Freedom of 2001, recognising this reality will be crucial.

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