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The Endgame in Afghanistan: Pakistan's Perspective and Policy

By Abdul Basit

Synopsis

The Afghanistan conflict is approaching its final and most critical phase, which offers challenges and opportunities to put the peace process on a right track. In this endgame Pakistan's Afghan policy sees re-integration and reconciliation among the Afghan political groups as a pre-requisite to any framework of peace in Afghanistan.

Commentary

For the last decade since the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan in October 2001, the security-centric approach to curb the Taliban-led insurgency has failed to achieve conclusive result. The security transition from the US-led international coalition forces to the Afghan national army and police projected to be realized by 2014 is taking place without any assurance of success. And there is no sign of a positive outcome in the sphere of political reconciliation.

The idea of the Afghan endgame was originally premised on two fundamental principles: security transition and political reconciliation, which were to proceed in tandem in order to create an enabling environment for peacemaking. After going through various transformative phases the Afghan project is entering its final phase but with a politically weak and corrupt government in Kabul and no sign of victory against a strong and resilient insurgency.

In retrospect the Bonn Conference 2001, which sidelined the Afghan Taliban from the political process, laid the foundation of a prolonged phase of violence in Afghanistan. After being routed by the invading US forces the Afghan Taliban re-emerged in 2004-05 and continued to wage a robust insurgency against the US-led and NATO/ISAF forces till today.

It is becoming clear that the endgame will need to take the Taliban into account as a partner in the political and possibly even the security equation. The Afghan peace process will need to give a stake to the surrounding countries as well, particularly Pakistan and India, while also engaging other neighbours like Iran and China. Along with various challenges the Afghan endgame also offers opportunities to correct the wrongs of the past decade with a more nuanced approach.

Pakistan's involvement

Pakistan, which has been involved in the Afghan operation by providing logistical support to the US-led NATO/ISAF security effort, by enabling the movement of men and materiel to Afghanistan through its territory, has in recent years been upset by US military action through drones surveillance flights and missile strikes against Taliban strongholds along the border of the Northwest Frontier province, resulting in Pakistani casualties as well as of Afghan civilians. However, Pakistan's role is viewed as a spoiler rather than a facilitator because of its reluctance to destroy the sanctuaries of the Haqqani (leadership) of the Afghan Taliban to pursue reconciliation with the Kabul government and the US.

In this regard the greatest suspicion is that Pakistan plans to support a Taliban takeover of Kabul after the withdrawal of US forces in 2014. However given the regional and international consensus against such a possibility it is highly unlikely that Pakistan will support such a misadventure. The Pakistan Army's 11th Corps commander in Peshawar has declared that Pakistan would oppose a Taliban takeover of Afghanistan, because that would make more difficult the task of eliminating the Pakistani Taliban. It would jeopardise Pakistan's counter-insurgency operations against its homegrown militants in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA). Pakistan wants inclusion of the Afghan insurgent groups in the process of political reconciliation and not a forceful takeover of the government in Kabul by these groups.

Pakistan's Policy on Afghan Reconciliation

Pakistan believes re-integration and reconciliation among the Afghan political groups is a pre-requisite to any framework of peace in Afghanistan. Furthermore, this process should be inclusive, ensuring representation of all ethnic and political groups of Afghanistan, including the Afghan Taliban and the Haqqani Network. A selective and exclusive reconciliation process will further push Afghanistan into instability and chaos.

In this regard the policy-making circles in Pakistan advocate an 'Afghan-led and Afghan-owned' approach to peacemaking efforts. This point was articulated by the Pakistani Foreign Minister Hina Rabbani Khar on 22 February this year in her speech at Chatham House, in London. She said, "Pakistan ... will support any and all initiatives that are all-inclusive, that are Afghan-led, Afghan-owned and Afghan-driven."

Pakistan's Afghan policy has been widely misunderstood because of its poor image and ineffective articulation of its policy. Pakistan's continuous political turmoil, economic malaise and strained relations with the US and Kabul, have further undermined its ability to present its case in a convincing manner.

It is also widely misunderstood that by supporting the agenda of political reconciliation with insurgent groups Pakistan wants to manipulate the process of the Afghan endgame in its favor. Pakistan's experience in the late 80s and early 90s of working with Afghan parties to agree to an acceptable power-sharing arrangement, after the Soviet withdrawal, was not a happy one. All pledges were broken and civil war broke out in two years. The Taliban movement was born out of the ashes of Afghan civil war and the policies pursued by the Taliban regime ultimately led to the current wave of conflict.

Pakistan, however, advocates the aforementioned approach no matter who leads the peace process. Pakistan's stance is clear: that "it will extend full support to any clear effort by the Afghan government to achieve any political settlement with the Taliban but does not want to lead a process that would impose any solution."

A review of the history of negotiations among Afghans reveals two points: i) Afghans are skillful negotiators. More often than not intra-Afghan negotiations are successful in forging some kind of understanding even under the most difficult circumstances; ii) the most effective and lasting deals have been the ones with minimal external involvement.

Indian Role in Afghanistan

While Pakistan's antipathy to India has historically shaped its approach to Afghanistan, ie that it should provide Pakistan with strategic depth against India, it has not allowed its apprehension of India's growing role in Afghanistan to cloud its view of the Indian presence. Pakistan accepts that India has a role to play in Afghanistan. In her speech at Chatham House FM Hina Rabbani Khar said 'Moreover we have done nothing to block any other initiatives. Anywhere. Nothing is as dear to Pakistan's national interest than peace, stability and security in Afghanistan'. While Pakistan supports a regional framework of non-interference in Afghanistan, any Indian role in Afghanistan within the framework of non-interference will be acceptable to Pakistan.

A stable and peaceful Afghanistan not only guarantees regional peace and stability but also increases the

possibility of unlocking the economic potential of this region. Instead of just short-term stabilizing measures Afghanistan requires an effective approach that offers a tangible solution. An exit in undue haste by the international coalition without a credible and sustainable political settlement will push Afghanistan toward another phase of protracted civil war which will benefit no one.

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