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Taliban Await US Withdrawal from Kabul

By Sajjad Ashraf

Synopsis

US Secretary of State John Kerry and President Hamid Karzai announced in Kabul last week that the two sides are close to a much-delayed deal on the Bilateral Security Agreement (BSA). However many details remain to be finalised.

Commentary

THE ANNOUNCEMENT by United States Secretary of State John Kerry and Afghan President Hamid Karzai earlier this month that the two sides are close to a much-delayed deal on a Bilateral Security Agreement (BSA) raises hopes of a peaceful if hurried withdrawal of US forces from the war-torn country.

If finalised, the BSA envisages a force of 5,000 to 10,000, which the US will leave behind while withdrawing the bulk of its forces from Afghanistan at the end of 2014. According to a US official accompanying Mr Kerry, the two countries “reached basic agreement on all key issues.”

Guaranteeing Afghan security

Notwithstanding the upbeat assessment of American officials, the issue of immunity from the Afghan law for the US troops remains, in the absence of which “there cannot be a bilateral security agreement,” said Mr. Kerry. Such a situation will compel the US to withdraw completely from Afghanistan. This will mean a similar European pull out and cut off of virtually all Coalition funding that meets roughly 80 per cent of Afghanistan government’s expense.

The assembly of tribal elders (Loya Jirga) will now determine the immunity question. Since most of these elders are beneficiaries of the status quo and American largesse they are expected to go along with Mr. Karzai’s recommendation. The shrewd tactician he is, Mr Karzai, however, kept open his option to renege on commitments, claiming he has yet to examine small issues and technical points.

The understanding became possible when the US conceded on its demand to conduct unilateral military operations after 2014. Guaranteed right to self-defence to the US troops in the immunity clause, if approved, may in some cases provide exceptions to the unilateral action clause.

It is unclear how the US would satisfy the Afghan demand of guaranteeing security as if the country was a NATO ally. Such an undertaking, which Washington is unlikely to give, puts the US in direct conflict with Pakistan, in case it is determined that there was a cross-border connection to a security situation.

Points to ponder

There are several other points to ponder both for the US and President Karzai in attempting to negotiate this deal. For the US a sufficient residual force can provide security and stability while the bulk withdraws by the end of 2014. It also provides a face-saver for the only super power that it is just not walking away completely in defeat.

For Mr. Karzai it is chance to prolong and hopefully preserve a system that he has created and on which his legacy depends. A BSA helps Mr. Karzai against the other power brokers amongst Northern Alliance, like Vice President Mohammad Fahim and Abdul Rashid Dostum who even run their own militias. While Mr. Karzai's need to drive a hard bargain to placate the nationalist Afghans is understood, he risks being jettisoned if he is seen to be an impediment to an orderly US withdrawal from Afghanistan.

Even if the agreement is reached its implementation will be doubtful if US runs into a series of casualties in the lead up to withdrawal. The wary Congress and public pressure is likely to raise a storm, difficult to withstand for an already embattled President.

While the Karzai regime survives only with foreign support, the presence of US forces will continue to provide the reason for the Afghan resistance groups, labeled contemptuously as Taliban, to rally Afghans against 'foreign forces'. Drawing parallel with the Soviet-installed Najibullah regime, the constant worry is that the administration Karzai leaves behind will not even survive two years, which Najibullah's did.

The hastily raised Afghan National Security Force, expected to lead in post-2014 defence, is not getting into shape. With a desertion rate of 30 per cent, a third of the force is to be found anew and trained annually. The recruits owe loyalty to the tribe or the warlord instead of a central authority. By nature of its creation it is meant to help shore up a regime planted by a 'foreign force,' which the Afghans resist as a part of their culture.

Converging interests of neighbours

The Karzai-US announcement notwithstanding "continued military presence in Afghanistan beyond 2014 would justify the continuation of war and bring grave consequences," warned Mullah Omar, the Taliban chief.

A troubled Afghanistan means Pakistan, the most concerned neighbour, remains a loser if some US forces stay and resistance continues with its spillover into Pakistan or if the US withdraws completely leaving Afghans to slug it out amongst themselves. This will mean 'jihadis' crossing over to help their comrades and hordes of refugees streaming to the Pakistani side.

Notwithstanding the American motives, interests of all other neighbours – Iran, Russia, China and the Central Asian Republics - coincide to the extent that they all want to see a non-Taliban regime installed in Kabul. But since Taliban are the face of resistance against foreign presence in Afghanistan, they remain a formidable force.

After the BSA, the US will need to immediately focus on arriving at an understanding with the Taliban. Afghanistan cannot return to peace without their participation.

The final act in the Afghan drama is yet to begin...

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