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Afghanistan After 2014 Election: US as Strategic Partner?

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Synopsis

The aftermath of the Afghan 2014 presidential election confirms two problems of Afghanistan today. Firstly, democracy is at its nascent stage and elections are not without problems. Secondly, Afghanistan is still a fragile country and needs continued engagement of the international community.

Commentary

AFTER THREE presidential elections since 2001, Afghanistan is still a fragile state. Afghans and the international community hailed the most recent April 2014 election as a national voice against the militants and a manifestation of political maturity among the Afghan powerbrokers. But one of the two candidates boycotted the election process, which led to weeks-long standoff on the election and a threat of forming a parallel government. This indicates that Afghanistan is still suffering from political instability and serious political divisions.

After 13 years in power, President Hamid Karzai's inability to figure out a solution to resolve election standoffs that are acceptable to the contending parties forced the intervention of the United States. In the latest case, Secretary of State John Kerry flew to Kabul and forged a commitment from both the candidates to form a government of national unity.

Afghanistan-US Strategic Partnership

Kerry urged a 100 percent audit of the votes in the presence of international observers. The audit process is not without issues but the American role shored up the need for a partnership with the US. It also shows that despite winding down its mission, the US still wields influence with the Afghan government and powerbrokers because Afghanistan receives billions of dollars in US aid.

In November 2013, President Karzai convened the Afghan Traditional Assembly, where around 2500 religious scholars, tribal leaders and government officials from across the country voiced support for the strategic partnership with the US.

President Karzai, however, held back his endorsement and left the partnership to be decided upon by his successor. This brought up a strong reaction from both the US and segments of Afghan society while Washington warned that refusal to approve the partnership would mean zero troop presence from all the NATO countries in Afghanistan.

President Karzai argued that the strategic partnership with the US without negotiation with the Taliban would not succeed in ending the war in Afghanistan. He even remarked that the war in Afghanistan is a battle over Afghanistan's geostrategic position. This means the US objective of denying terrorists sanctuaries in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region is becoming secondary to its objectives of tackling the threat of an emerging China and a re-assertive Russia in the broader region.

The US may well have such a broader objective. But in the meantime, what is crucial to Afghanistan is that without continued engagement of the international community, it is not yet ready to stand on its feet politically, militarily and economically. The country's political fragility and the uncooperative neighbourhood necessitate a strong strategic partner. Such a partnership can be part and parcel of efforts to hold the country together and avert a repeat of the 1992 crisis as a result of the non-involvement in the peace process by the Taliban.

Uncooperative Neighbourhood

For the Taliban strategic partnership with the US means continued fighting in the country. Their leader Mullah Mohammad Omar in his Eid message released in late July 2014 called on the candidates not to endorse the partnership and said that the war in Afghanistan would end when all the foreign troops pull out. But reservations prevail that the Taliban and their external backers may not cease violence even after a complete withdrawal of foreign troops.

This is because the Taliban's fight during last 13 years in Afghanistan centred on two agendas - one to defend the country against foreign invasion and the other to re-instate the Islamic Emirate there. The latter is an equivocal no to the current government system and the Afghan constitution, which suggests the possibility of continued fighting by the Taliban even after the complete withdrawal of foreign troops.

Afghanistan also suffers from an uncooperative neighbourhood. In 2013 Pakistan said it charted a policy of "no interference and no favourites" towards Afghanistan but its apparent indifference to the presence of the Afghan Taliban on its soil proved the policy to be only rhetoric. Pakistani military is now positioned across the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) to only dismantle the anti-Pakistan militants.

The ongoing operation Zarb-e-Azb in North Waziristan Agency (NWA) is an indicator of such a strategy; there is as yet no sign of the Haqqani Network being targeted in NWA. There have even been speculation that the Haqqani Network was allowed to evacuate from NWA prior to the launch of the operation and operate from Kurram Agency of FATA- which remains largely safe from the US drone attacks. The intensity of the ongoing spring offensive "Khaibar" launched by the Afghan Taliban and the Haqqani Network in Afghanistan also shows the absence of any pressure on both these entities in Pakistan. These were the first operations of such a scale by the Taliban and the Haqqani Network since 2010 and the Afghan government claimed that Pakistani military and intelligence were also involved.

Two options

In such a scenario where the Taliban seems determined to sabotage the country's stability with continued support from Pakistan and where the goal is to re-instate the Islamic Emirate in Afghanistan, there are only two options open to the next Afghan government. One is to proceed with the strategic partnership with the US and face the belligerent Taliban but with the potential to gradually neutralise them. Afghans in general do not want the Islamic Emirate and thus the future government must deliver to the people by closing the chasm with the public in the past 13 years.

The second is to negate the strategic partnership and risk deterioration in the current political

landscape as the 2014 election has shown. This option is clearly not feasible as it will lead to the military and economic dysfunction of the state. The West has already made it clear that no strategic partnership with the US means no troop presence from any country and that the responsibility for the consequences of zero troop presence lies with the Afghan government.

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