



ZERO OPTION & AFGHAN STABILITY **KARZAI, OBAMA AND THE HIGH STAKES**



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Obama's recent public announcement of a "Zero Option" in Afghanistan for the US highlights the seriousness of the drift between Kabul and Washington. Karzai and Obama along with their respective administrations and public opinions may have their own reasons, expectations and disappointments.

However, the larger question is: will this drift help Afghan-US relations, and more importantly, will this help the nation building process, and the regional security?

I **THE ZERO OPTION: ESSENCE AND RATIONALE**

Before analysing whether the "Zero Option" that Obama has put forward in

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public is a bluff or a threat, or both, a short description of what this option is all about. Though the Zero Option for the US in Afghanistan has been debated outside the administrative circles during the recent months, it was not publicly put forward as an American option after 2014. The Zero Option perceives a complete withdrawal of the American troops in Afghanistan after the 2014 deadline.

This option is in sharp contradiction with two other strategies that the US has been pursuing and advocating in public. Since 2010-11, the Obama administration has been in dialogue with the Afghan government, which finally resulted in a strategic partnership between in early 2012, with the US making a commitment not to abandon Afghanistan after 2014. The second strategy, for which the Obama administration is continuing a dialogue with Karzai's government even today – aims at a "Residue American Force" in Afghanistan after 2014.



Obviously the Zero Option does not go hand in hand with the American promise not to abandon Afghanistan or station a residue force after 2014.

According to open source, there are over 60,000 American troops in Afghanistan today; this is expected to reduce gradually down to 34,000 by February 2014. According to the "residue" approach, this process will further continue, down to the deadline in December 2014, but would not result in a complete withdrawal.

The "residue force" after December 2014, is to serve three purposes. First and foremost, the residue American force, whatever the number may be, will ensure that whatever has been achieved militarily in the last ten years do not go to waste. This will be done by an overall assessment of the ground situation in Afghanistan after 2014. The second objective is to continue the training of Afghan troops; the Afghan National Army in terms of number and also in terms of training needs further support from within and from outside. The last objective, the most important one, for keeping an American residue force after 2014, is to ensure that the al Qaeda network across the Durand Line is completely neutralized and does not get revived.

Though Osama bin Laden was killed a few years ago, the al Qaeda and Taliban networks still remain across the Durand

Line. The Americans are using drones as a primary strategy, based in Afghanistan, but targeting the al Qaeda and Taliban leadership in the FATA region of Pakistan. The US will not be able to operate drones sitting in the Arabian Sea or in Washington. For reasons of human intelligence and technical capabilities, besides legal issues involving flying the drones across mainland Pakistan or Iran, Afghanistan will have to remain the primary base for this operation. This will also mean not only the military, but also the presence of CIA as a part of American residue force in Afghanistan.

Obama's Zero Option directly contradicts the above three objectives behind the Residue American Force. In fact, it even contradicts the ongoing negotiations with the Karzai administration to have a legal sanction for the continuation of American troops after 2014. Like the earlier American attempt to have a similar agreement in Iraq, there are serious reservations and oppositions amongst the Afghan policy makers. It is not easy for Karzai to get the approval of his Parliament to provide a legal sanction for the American troops to operate after 2014. On the other hand, the American Congress will not approve Obama to continue deploying the American troops – residue or otherwise, without proper legal sanctions.

Hence, the Obama administration has been negotiating hard with the Karzai government. The sudden announcement by Obama on the Zero option contradicts the ongoing American effort with the Karzai government. Why then has Obama made such an announcement? Clearly, the Obama option of Zero is not linked with a long term military strategy aimed at a political objective in Afghanistan after 2014. It appears more as a bluff, directly aimed at a short term

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political objective – threatening Karzai to play along with the American objectives.

What are Obama's objectives behind this bluff/threat? First and foremost, Obama administration is upset, perhaps angry with Karzai for sabotaging the Doha process with the Taliban. Thus the Zero Option does not look like well thought strategy, but kneejerk reaction to Karzai's outbursts over the Doha process. For the US, the Doha process is important, as the 2014 deadline approaches; the White House believes, only this process would get Taliban on board and thus bring stability to Afghanistan after 2014.

II THE DOHA DISASTER & THE DIALOGUE WITH THE TALIBAN

For the last many years, there has been a section within the US, and supported by Pakistan, advocating the presence of a "Good Taliban"! Added to this mysterious discovery of a Good Taliban by the US and Pakistan is the belief that they could be negotiated with.

A section in the US which believes in the "Good Taliban" and views that Mullah Omar is the real problem and not every fighter within the movement. The logic then is, if with proper inducements the "Good" Taliban could be identified and weaned away, it would then break up the movement. In other words, the Americans could divide and destroy the Taliban. The strategy seems to be: Identify the Good Taliban, Isolate Mullah Omar and Insulate the Peace Process from Quetta Shura.

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Pakistan's objective is not to break the Taliban or isolate Mullah Omar, but to ensure that Islamabad has a predominant role in deciding who rules Kabul after 2014. For Pakistan, Taliban is the strategy and trump card for their future plans in Kabul. It is well known, despite multiple attempts, including the latest "charm offensive" by Sartaj Aziz, Karzai and most of his administration remains cold, and perhaps even hostile towards Pakistan.

The US has been attempting to reach out to the Taliban, or indirectly encouraging the others to pursue such an option. Earlier efforts and negotiations with the Taliban did take place secretly in Germany and later in France. Pakistan was not privy to these initiatives, hence Islamabad scuttled it by arresting Taliban leaders within. Though the US has been extremely reluctant in having Pakistan on board in negotiating with the Taliban, it appears that Washington now has reconciled to have Pakistan included in negotiating with the Taliban. Or perhaps, Pakistan has succeeded in underlining its importance to the future stability of Kabul, and convinced the US that it would be better to have Islamabad within the circle. As a result, finally on the Doha process, Pakistan seemed to be on board.

Meanwhile, within Afghanistan, Karzai

had formed a jirga to officially negotiate with the Taliban. What is generally projected as an “Afghan owned, Afghan led” peace process started taking place; though painfully slow, the process has not been abandoned so far, despite difference and suicide attacks. Though initially reluctant, Karzai seems to be open to this option – of an internal dialogue with the Taliban, but led by his own High Peace Council.

Clearly, there have been two parallel initiatives in engaging the Taliban. The first one led by the US, with Pakistan on board now; and the second one led by the Afghan High Peace Council.

The Qatar process should be seen in the above developments. Either the US finally got the breakthrough with the Taliban, or the Taliban backers in Pakistan pressurized the US to initiate a parallel process. Does the Qatar process makes sense, when there is already an effort by the Afghan government through the High Peace Council to dialogue with the Taliban? Especially, when this process is projected as “Afghan Owned and Afghan Led”, what is the need for a separate process, that too in Qatar?

If the US would have wanted this process with the Taliban (with or without the support from Pakistan), ideally it would have merged it with the “Afghan Owned and Afghan Led” process, and let the

High Peace Council and Taliban negotiate directly with each other, with US and the rest of international community (including Pakistan) supporting the process from outside. And Karzai ideally would have wanted this process to take place within Afghanistan. Certainly, Doha could not have been his first choice.

The Qatar process was doomed to fail for two reasons. First, it was “American led and American owned”. Where was the Afghan component in this process outside the Taliban? Were the Afghan consulted – from the venue to the focus of the talks? Second, perhaps, Karzai also believed, or afraid that the Qatar process will supplement the “Afghan owned, Afghan led” initiative. From his later outbursts, now it appears clear that Karzai was not enthusiastic about the Qatar process; perhaps, wanted to give it a try, or did not want to be projected as a villain of peace. Or simply, there was too much of American pressure on him.

But what happened in Doha subsequently infuriated the Karzai administration. Unfortunately, the way the Taliban was allowed to build an office, along with its flag and plaque made Karzai’s fears come true. Perhaps, Karzai today is afraid that there is an “American led, American imposed” solution under the guise of Afghan support. Karzai, perhaps is also afraid that there is a larger American-Pakistani collusion on the future of Kabul. Obviously, he would not want sign a statement prepared by Washington and Islamabad, and implemented through Qatar, but projected as “Afghan owned and Afghan led” peace process.

Perhaps Obama and his administration mis-read or underestimated the Afghan pride. When it comes to Afghans, more

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than international relations and political science, history and sociology would be better disciplines to understand how an Afghan mind would respond and react in a given situation.

III

BEYOND THE ZERO OPTION & KABUL-WASHINGTON RELATIONS: WHAT NEXT?

What political or military purpose will a Zero option serve for Obama, other than threatening Karzai to fall in line with Washington's plan for post-2014 Afghanistan? What options do Karzai has, if Obama has to go beyond this bluff?

Despite all the negative publicity that the democratic and governance processes have attracted at the global level, there have been substantial positive developments at the ground level within Afghanistan, thanks to international community's initiatives, especially the US.

ZERO OPTION: WILL IT DEMOLISH EVERYTHING THAT HAS BEEN ACHIEVED SO FAR?

First and foremost, despite all the criticism and denigration, the Afghan security forces have made a great first step. Some of the recent responses to terrorist attacks will highlight the road that the Afghan security forces has travelled and crossed. On the governance process, once again, amidst numerous accusations over corruption and red tape, there have been remarkable developments – from the number of mobile phones to the extent of paved roads within Afghanistan. This includes educational and medical facilities, institutions at the ground level, security situation, life expectancy and local economy.

While Karzai has to be held accountable, the international community should also understand, the situation in Afghanistan is not as easy as a vending machine – that someone pops in a coin, and get a cola can in few seconds. The institutions after being thoroughly demolished under four previous regimes – Taliban, Mujahideen, Communist and Monarch, are in the process of being established

Never before in the history of mankind, would a country have gone through such a dramatic transformation in such a short period. From Mullah Omar promulgating edicts in small pieces of papers to mobile phones and TV shows – there has been a huge shift. One should appreciate the fact that it will never be easier to make visible impact and substantial transformation in a nation that has seen only change in the regimes as a constant. Since that fateful agreement between Mortimer Durand and the Amir Abdur Rahman Khan in 1893 resulting in the Durand Line, almost 120 years ago, there have been multiple dynasties, regimes, great games, internal divisions and external invasions. From monarchy to communism to anarchy under the mujahideen to stone age under the Taliban to American invasion and the subsequent Karzai administration – Afghanistan has witnessed every form of a government, nigh, anarchy in a span of a century.

After being destroyed systematically, a nation cannot be built in ten years. On the other hand, Karzai is neither Bismarck the Statesman, nor Garibaldi the romantic soldier – two great institutions that united Germany and Italy respectively. Undoubtedly, there are issues of governance, high level of corruption and failure of delivery mechanisms. Karzai has his own limitations as a statesman, ruler

and the President. One of the common criticisms amongst the international community – that there no accountability under his administration – may very well be absolutely true.

THE STAKES ARE TOO HIGH: CAN WE AFFORD TO ABANDON AFGHANISTAN NOW?

While Karzai has to be held accountable on all these issues, the international community should also understand, the situation in Afghanistan is not as easy as a vending machine – that someone pops in a coin, and get a cola can in few seconds. The institutions after being thoroughly demolished under four previous regimes – Taliban, Mujahideen, Communist and Monarch, are in the process of being established.

At the international level, there is not only fatigue, but also impatience being set in. We need faster solutions and we need them today and now. We do not understand that the nations cannot be built in a span of a decade, despite witnessing the same process in our conditions, taking centuries to finish the process.

As a result, whatever the US and the rest of international community has achieved in the last ten years, the zero option will demolish. Though the zero option is being discussed primarily at the level of

American troops remaining in Afghanistan after 2014, the obvious follow up will be in terms of declining support to the Afghan military. Naturally, this will follow up with further decline in the international aid after 2014.

The stakes are too high; we cannot afford to abandon Afghanistan. Not now. Failing Afghanistan is failing ourselves.

MR KARZAI, THERE ARE NO FREE TICKETS TODAY

By no means, Afghanistan will be closer to a well knit nation, by the end of 2014. The Afghan security forces alone will need billions of dollars – from salary to ammunition. The Afghan economy is no where closer to be self sufficient; international aid remains primary component to national budget. Zero Option would spell doom for the Afghan security forces and the economy.

Undoubtedly, Obama is also answerable to his domestic opinion. There have been multiple questions within the US: why should the US fund the Afghan troops, if they are not going to be there? Will Karzai and the Afghan government provide legal provisions supporting the American troops presence after 2014? If not, why should the American troops remain in Afghanistan after 2014?

And the international community is obviously bound to ask critical and uncomfortable questions regarding accountability and the governance process in Afghanistan. Karzai cannot keep going back to the 1980s and the subsequent abandonment as the original sin. If Afghanistan has undergone dramatic changes in the last century, there has never been a country that attracted such an international attention and aid. International investment and aid

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in Afghanistan cannot be a one way street.

Karzai should also understand the international frustration and fatigue.

MR OBAMA, AFGHANISTAN IS NOT AN AMERICAN VASSAL

One of the popular narratives within the US perceives Karzai as an ungrateful partner. A section within the US thinks that Karzai should be grateful and the Afghans eternally thankful to what the Americans have spent during the last ten years. From financial aid to body bags, the War on Terrorism in Afghanistan has costed the Americans substantially – in economic and psychological terms.

True, the Americans have made substantial sacrifices. But should this mean, Afghanistan be subservient to the American interests? And if Karzai and his administration want to have an “Afghan owned and Afghan led”, should the US help that initiative, or impose its own?

After invading Afghanistan, the US as the only super power, has a responsibility to perform. If Obama wants to abandon Afghanistan after 2014, as the US did after 1988, it will not only affect the nation building process in Afghanistan, but also the regional stability in South Asia and Central Asia. Besides, this will also impose a huge credibility question – in terms of how much the US could be trusted. Any failure in Afghanistan will create substantial question of reliability for the US in East Asia and Southeast Asia. With the US planning to re-enter into the Asia Pacific, with ambitious phrases such as pivot and rebalancing, Obama cannot afford to have an Afghan baggage.

Iraq has already damaged the American reputation considerably. If the US has to

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leave instability as its legacy in every region, very soon its ability to steer global security architecture will get flattened. True, the US may remain the only military super power, but the security relations are not going to be built purely by military power.

More than what will the Zero option do for the US, what will be interesting to forecast is Karzai's strategy, if Obama moves ahead with his threat? Karzai can call off the American bluff by approaching the Russians and Chinese. Especially the latter will be too happy to support Afghanistan; given the larger Chinese push into Africa, Latin America and Southeast Asia, Beijing will not blink twice to accept such an offer.

Karzai and Obama should understand the larger good. While Karzai should understand that there are no free tickets, Obama should understand Afghanistan is an independent country and not an American vassal. Neither the national security of Afghanistan, nor the regional security of South Asia and Central Asia could afford a faultline between the two Presidents and two countries.

More importantly, a stable Afghanistan is in everyone's interest.

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