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Afghanistan, US and the Peace Process: A Deal with the Taliban in 2014?

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If the rise in violence this month is any mark of the year that is to be, then we can conclude that 2014 will turn out to be an ominous year for Afghans. The winter season in Afghanistan, which tends to witness a reduction in fighting, has in fact faced a sharp rise in violence, shocking many in Afghanistan. In Kabul alone there have been several attacks, in and around the fortified diplomatic enclave, targeting both local and foreign security personnel, government and military installations. Many believe this to be a glimpse of what is yet to come, as Afghanistan gets ready to hold its third Presidential elections in April 2014.

US Lt General Mark Milley has predicted that this trend is likely to continue into 2014 with insurgents targeting. For many locals, this scenario has reinforced their anxieties concerning the prospects for 2014 being a pivotal year, marking the end of the security transition process, withdrawal of international troops, and handover of all political, security and development responsibilities to the Afghan leadership. While the challenges to peace and security are many, the solutions however are extremely limited and difficult to reach in the time-lines that have been set. One such mechanism has been the Afghan peace and reconciliation programme (or peace process) which was launched in 2010. This process envisioned political means to facilitate military measures for reconciliation and reintegration of insurgents through talks and negotiations. This process was to assist the security transition process and set the stage for the handover of all responsibilities from international to Afghan ownership by the end of 2014. However, the lack of achievements coupled with consistent setbacks and growing obstacles have done little to set the foundation needed to ensuring peace and stability post-2014. With the prospects for reaching a peace deal with the insurgency almost next to none, many are left wondering what to expect from it in the post-2014 period.

The Afghan peace process is a two-tiered initiative with a reintegration and a reconciliation pillar, both of which have been implemented simultaneously. The reintegration pillar has been implemented at the sub-national level where foot soldiers are enticed to reintegrate and take advantages of the financial incentives provided by the 'Afghanistan Peace and Reintegration Programme'. The reconciliation pillar on the other hand has been implemented at the national and regional levels where the Taliban leadership has been approached to participate in official channels of communication with the Afghan government in the hopes of starting a negotiation process that could lead to a peace deal. Thus far the Afghan government has been able to reintegrate 7,375 foot soldiers and local commanders, making reintegration a relatively successful programme, whereas reconciliation efforts have consistently hit roadblocks with no major achievements to date.

The Afghan government and its international partners have tried to win over the top tier of the insurgency by employing several trust-building mechanisms. These include the release of Taliban prisoners by the Afghan government, removal of UN sanctions and blacklist against former Taliban members, the creation of a political address for senior-level Taliban commanders for their participation in mainstream politics, allowing representatives of the insurgency to participate in track II meetings abroad, offering Taliban and other armed groups non-elected positions and opportunities to be included into the power structure of the state. In response, the Taliban have

increased their attacks across Afghanistan, continued to engage in indiscriminate killings of civilians as reflected in the spike in civilian casualties observed in 2013 which marked the second highest recorded year since 2001, targeted killings of Afghan government officials including the High Peace Council members, parliamentarians, and Afghan National Security Forces, continued implementation of their draconian laws in areas under their influence, refusal to enter peace talks with the Afghan government whom they still refer to as a puppet regime which has sustained their inflexibility in accepting the 'red-lines' for entering negotiations (which include accepting the Afghan Constitution and breaking ties with international terrorists groups including al Qaeda). While many experts will argue that the Taliban have shown a steady willingness to negotiate over the years, their actions however continue to denote another tone.

It remains highly doubtful that the Afghan government and its international backers will strike a peace deal with the Taliban before 2014 or even in the immediate post-2014 environment for that matter. This is not surprising considering that in the past five years the Afghan government and the international community have been largely unsuccessful, and that such efforts have become ever more daunting as the security transition process enters its last tranche and the international community is set to withdraw by the end of 2014 irrespective of the scenario that emerges between the Afghan government and the insurgency by the end of this year. At the current juncture, ground realities continue to display the Taliban to be in a position of strength, a trend that has been strengthened, instead of weakened, by the peace process.

Afghanistan: The Security Transition

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Afghanistan went through very challenging processes of political stabilizing, economic development and security transition in 2013. The security transition, BSA and the preparation for Presidential elections in 2014 could be identified as three major developments during the last year.

Security Transition

The 0.5 million of Afghanistan National Security Forces (ANSF) took considerable responsibilities of security from 0.1 million International Security Forces (ISF). This transition started as "Kabul Process" in 2010 and will be completed in 2014. Moreover still ANSF totally depend on international aid money moreover there is need for mentorship of ANSF. The threats from terrorists groups are very high and international support is key to sustainability of the ANSF in their struggle for stabilization of the Afghanistan.

Hakimullah Mehsud Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) leader; Nasiruddin Haqani, financier of Jalaluddin Haqani Network and a number of other terrorist high and mid ranking leaders were killed by drone attacked during 2013. Moreover, Afghanistan government has initiated a peace process in 2010 to bring Taliban to peace negotiations. In 2013, Taliban agreed for opening a representative office in Doha, Qatar. At early stage, Afghanistan government supported the idea, but soon the Taliban office was closed due to Afghanistan government insistency on lowering Taliban Emirate Flag. President Karzai met with a number of Taliban leaders secretly in 2013 for paving the ground for peace negotiation, but so far, less development is availed.

Government of Afghanistan, after gaining the control of Bagram military Base prison from ISF— ISF's biggest insurgency prison— continued releasing the Taliban prisoners to signal Taliban leaders for agreeing on negotiation. This gesture has been very controversial, even Afghanistan intelligence and judicial officials complained, although political oppositions disagreed with this policy from the very beginning.

Bilateral Security Agreement (BSA)

The 'drafted by Afghan-US governments in 2013, this is a document that legalize the stationing of roughly 9,000 to 12,000 ISF to remain beyond 2014 for mentoring ANSF and also conducting counterterrorism campaign against Al Qaeda and other insurgent groups in Afghanistan. BSA will also provide eight military bases for ISF longterm stay in Afghanistan.

The BSA went through long national processes of consultations. President Karzai organized a 'Consultative Loya Jirga' (CLJ) where nearly 3,000 people from 34 provinces of Afghanistan were invited to advice him for approval/disapproval of this document. CLJ with considerable majority supported the endorsement of the BSA asked President Karzai for 'go ahead'. Moreover, President Hamid Karzai made a number of diplomatic visits from regional countries and seeked their sight on BSA. Excluding Iran, the rest supported the endorsement; still BSA is not signed yet.

Preparing for 2014 Elections

Afghanistan Independent Election commission (AIEC) took the responsibility of organization Elections in 2009 from international fellows, therefore upcoming 2014 presidential election is the second experience that Afghans are on lead practicing peaceful transferring of political power through free and fair election, 2013 was a very busy year for AIEC. Although the entire process is funded from the international aid and unfortunately Afghans still is not able to finance their election. The total cost of the election is estimated around \$130 million.

In 2013, initially though the initial list was bigger, after the relevant processes and vetting, there are only 11 candidates who will contest for presidential election in early 2014.

The four top candidates are: Dr. Abdullah Abdullah, opposition leader; Dr. Ashraf Ghani Ahmadizai former Chairman of Inteqal Board; Dr. Zalmai Rasoul, former Minister of Foreign Affairs and Mr. Qayum Karzai, older and full blood brother of President Karzai.

Issues of Governance

Afghanistan processes of security and political transitions have created relatively a level of fear among domestic and international investors. Afghanistan witnessed a serious of cash smuggling to abroad in 2013. Da Afghanistan Bank (DAB) failed to prevent this. This cost huge level of inflation, unemployment in market. According to statement from Afghanistan Ministry of Finance, still nearly %65 of Afghanistan national budget is from international aid.

Information communication technology moved upward in 2013. By now, over 70 percent of Afghanistan population that is roughly 20 million people have access to mobile phones. 3G and 4G packages of Internet access through smart phones were another booming market in 2013 especially in big cities of Kabul, Mazar and Herat.

Corruption and Drug cultivation still remains the two major issues in Afghanistan in 2013. Government and international stakeholders failed to decrease its volumes. Both issues are potential

threats for political and economic stability in Afghanistan for the years to come.

Afghanistan national football team defeated India in final match of SAFF (South Asian Football Federation) companionship brought home the victory trophy. This was a great national pride for Afghans. Afghans around the country got out on the streets and cheered up their victory. This great achievement continued with victory of Afghanistan National Cricket in Abu Dhabi matches and ascended to 2015 world cup competition.

2013 was a rough year for Afghan women. A number of serious violence cases, which were cutting lips and noses of women by their family members covered all the national and international media. Women believed to have a long way to get their rights and to be dealt as equal citizens in this country.

Afghanistan: Implications of the Bilateral Security Agreement (BSA)

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The debate on the signing of the Bilateral Security Agreement (BSA) between Afghanistan and the US has been reignited after the State of the Union address by the US President on in January 2014. While the US is insisting on signing it at the earliest, Afghan President Karzai is in no hurry, saying that it should be considered only after the Afghan presidential elections in April. The US Defence Secretary Chuck Hagel asserted on that the US and its allies cannot continue to put off decisions about a post-2014 mission in Afghanistan indefinitely, and urged President Karzai to sign the pact.

While the debate continues, it would be interesting to examine whether the BSA can actually deliver peace and ensure lasting security, as being projected by the US. Will the signing of BSA severely alter the security situation in Afghanistan post 2014?

The BSA has taken into consideration some of the key concerns of the Afghan government. It states that the US does not seek permanent military facilities in Afghanistan or a presence that is a threat to Afghanistan's neighbours, and has pledged not to use Afghan territory or facilities as a launching point for attacks against other countries. It also reaffirms American commitment to the sovereignty, independence, territorial integrity and national unity of Afghanistan, as well as respect for Afghan laws, customs and traditions.

The BSA also states that the US military operations to defeat al Qaeda and its affiliates would continue in the common fight against terrorism. There would, however, be no unilateral US counter-terrorism operations, but would complement and support ANDSF's operations, with ANDSF in lead and with full regard for the safety and security of the Afghan people, including in their homes. It clearly highlights the commitment to financial pledges set at the Chicago Summit in 2012 to support the ANDSF.

What does BSA Promise?

The BSA promises the presence of around 10,000 troops, training and support and financial assistance to ANDSF. The troops are to be located in five to six bases which the US would retain in Afghanistan. The troops would be employed in training the ANDSF and provide logistics, air, communications and intelligence support. The troops could also be employed in counter-terrorist operations within the guidelines given in the BSA. The overarching promise of the BSA, as projected by the US, is the security guarantees it would be able to give to Afghanistan if it retains its troops there. It would however be interesting to see how feasible this would be.

At the peak of the US-led operations in Afghanistan in 2010-12 and to some extent even in 2013 (when responsibility was been transitioned to ANDSF), there were around 1,48,000 international troops. These troops had full authority over military operations in Afghanistan. The ANDSF was meanwhile being raised from a mere 70,000 to around 3,52,000 by the end of 2012. This included about 1,49,000 Afghan National Army (ANA) personnel and the remainder as police forces. The US-led forces conducted sustained 'summer military campaigns' over these three years to establish security as well as counter the Taliban's 'spring offensive' every year.

As repeatedly admitted by US military commanders, despite sustained military operations, the Taliban remained resilient and strong. The international forces were able to drive out the Taliban from selected areas and even reverse their momentum in key areas including the core areas of Helmand and Kandahar, but only for some time and that too at the cost of increasing Taliban influence in west and north Afghanistan. Even with troops on the ground, air assets, drones and embedded intelligence, the international forces could not prevent Taliban attacks across the country. Even the closely guarded city of Kabul was witness to frequent Taliban attacks. The recent incident of the Taliban suicide attack on a Lebanese restaurant that left 21 dead, including 13 foreign civilians, in Kabul is being counted as one of the deadliest attacks on foreign nationals in Afghanistan.

The BSA hinges on three issues: security in Afghanistan, building up the ANDSF, and financial support. Of these, only the first one primarily requires the presence of foreign troops. Building up capability can be done through training missions or teams co-employed with Afghan instructors in various academies and training centres. Also, the option of training them abroad exists. Financial aid hinges on how honest the international commitment towards rebuilding Afghanistan is, and this could thus be delinked from the BSA.

It is interesting that although the BSA is being propped up as the most essential pre-requisite for security in Afghanistan post 2014, the fact remains that it is not. 10,000 or 12,000 troops cannot do what 1,50,000 better equipped troops could not do over a decade. ANDSF ultimately requires mentoring, equipment and funding. They have to be able to fight their own battle.

Indian Military Aid to Afghanistan

D Suba Chandran

Director, IPCS

After the recent visit of President Karzai to New Delhi, there have been a series of editorials and commentaries on the nature of the Indo-Afghan strategic partnership; Indian military aid to Afghanistan in particular. Should India consider this option and pursue it? Is it not in the interest of Afghanistan's future? Will it not help stabilise the bilateral strategic partnership?

First and foremost, the request has come from Afghanistan. India has always taken pride in letting the rest of the world know that its support to Kabul is not in terms of what New Delhi wants, but rather what Afghanistan and its people need. If the primary objective of India's aid to Afghanistan is based on what Kabul wants and the country needs, then why should New Delhi delay the provision of military aid to Afghanistan?

A distinction needs to be made between Indian military presence in and military aid to Afghanistan. In fact, Afghanistan would not be interested in an Indian military presence in the country - boots on Afghan ground has been discussed at length in India and the majority agree that it would not be productive. Besides an Indian military presence, there have been discussions on training the Afghan security forces. India has agreed to train them, and although Afghanistan would prefer to enlarge the scope in terms of number of officials trained, there has been a steady growth in the training process regardless. Generally, it has been accepted both in India and Afghanistan that this is much needed and on the right track.

The debate therefore is certainly not about Indian military presence or training. It has been amply discussed and has already been decided upon. The issue facing India is military aid to Afghanistan.

What does Afghanistan want, and for what purpose? Kabul wants to augment its counter-insurgency capacity and hence requires related equipment - from helicopters to communication tools. Given the nature of Afghanistan's terrain and the extent of threats, it is important that the Afghan security forces are armed with adequate systems, and more significantly, enough logistical support for the forces that are engaged in the actual fighting.

Unlike the Indian case where India has desisted from using air power to fighting insurgency, in Afghanistan, perhaps it is a necessity. Even more important is to ensure that lines of communication are open to the troops that are fighting insurgency in remote areas. Given the geographical expanse of Afghanistan, and the writ of the State, such air support is vital for fighting insurgency. In India, the military and paramilitary are present everywhere and can comb the terrain inch by inch without losing physical communications with the base. This is not the case in Afghanistan.

If this is what Afghanistan requires, why is India hesitant in providing such military support? The reasons put forward do not augur well, either for the Indian image in Afghanistan, or the promise India has made for its strategic partnership. True, the partnership agreement may not commit India to provide military aid; but the agreement is political. So is Indian military aid to Afghanistan. Providing military aid is political in terms of showing solidarity to the Afghan government and its people. Precisely for this reason, military aid becomes strategic.

India would certainly not like to see an unstable Afghanistan in terms of its government finding it difficult to fight the insurgency. Especially when the international community has worked hard to build this force over the last decade and the government and its people are willing to fight. It would be a colossal loss if they fail because of lack of adequate military support.

It therefore makes no sense to ask what will happen if Indian military aid falls into the wrong hands. Will it be acceptable for India if the entire infrastructure and investments made so far fall into the wrong hands just because India failed to provide the right military support at the right time?

Finally, the foreign policy question: that of India providing military aid to another country. There are enough reports in the public domain highlighting Indian military support (lethal or otherwise) to the Sri Lankan government to fight the LTTE. If this could be done in Sri Lanka, despite opposition from Tamil Nadu and Sri Lankan Tamils, what stops New Delhi from repeating the same strategy in Afghanistan, especially when the majority within India would support such a move?

Another foreign policy question is whether such support would undermine Indo-Pak relations and offend Islamabad's sensitivities. Such an argument does not make sense, especially when Afghanistan is requesting weapon systems not to wage an external war, but to fight an internal insurgency. A counter question would be – suppose India does not provide military aid; will India-Pakistan relations become a model bilateral partnership? Especially when Karzai is also attempting to strike a balance with Islamabad, the Pakistan factor in India's military aid to Afghanistan does not make sense.

India should thus go ahead and provide the necessary military aid to Afghanistan.

US and Afghanistan: BSA and Taliban Negotiations

Athul Athul

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The bilateral security agreement (BSA) and negotiations with the Taliban were the main issues between the US and Afghanistan in 2013. The future of the US-Afghan relationship is heavily reliant on the bilateral agreement and the evolving security situation in the country.

The BSA Debate

The BSA is the framework for long-term relations between the US and Afghanistan – it has a life span of ten years. It lays down the future of US aid and governance advice to Afghanistan. This also covers the areas of regional cooperation and security.

The US insists on signing the treaty because without it the US will not be able to keep its residual forces in Afghanistan after 2014. As the bulk of US and NATO troops withdraw, 15,000 troops will remain in Afghanistan for training and counter-terrorism missions. Washington does not want a repetition of Iraq where a security deal could not be made, leading to a total withdrawal of US forces from Iraq. The aftermath of withdrawal was the escalation of sectarian violence and resurgence of the al Qaeda in which nearly 8,000 people were killed in 2013.

Despite initially being cleared by the loya jirga and the primary draft being accepted by Karzai himself, Karzai later refused to sign the agreement due to disagreements on issues such as legal

immunity of the US residual forces, the entry of US forces into Afghan homes, conduct of night-time raids as well as the release of Afghan prisoners from Guantanamo Bay. The US has said that if the BSA is not signed promptly, it would be forced to initiate a plan for post 2014 Afghanistan, which will not involve US presence. This move could adversely affect the security and stability of Afghanistan, as the Afghan National Army (ANA) is still dependent on the US for various aspects of combat capability such as air power and logistical support, even though the ANA has taken over the combat operations from the multi-national forces in 2013. The Afghan security forces have been incurring heavy casualties since taking over the fight, with over 1,100 personnel killed in a span of six months.

Presently the NATO forces are involved only in the training of the Afghan army and law enforcement personnel. The ANA is completely dependent on the US for air support since Afghanistan is unlikely to have a functional air force before 2017. Karzai has not signed the security deal for many reasons. According to some experts, Karzai is concerned about his relevance in Afghan politics after 2014 and his desire to be remembered as a strong leader necessitates that he is favoured among the Pashtuns. Domestic political gain is Karzai's main motivation for not signing the BSA - Karzai does not want to be seen as a president who did not stand up to the US demands.

Negotiations with the Taliban

Although the US-Taliban talks were mediated by Qatar, the talks soon fell through primarily due to the Taliban not agreeing to a deal which would keep guerrilla commanders released from Guantanamo under Qatari supervision in Doha.

The Afghan government broke the talks with the Taliban as the Taliban tried to use the office in Qatar as an alternative embassy and flew the old Taliban flag. President Karzai stated that he would not pursue peace talks with the Taliban as they were using their Doha office as a parallel political entity. He also took issue with the Taliban's use of the name, Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. Currently, the Afghan government is seeking US help in negotiating with the Taliban. Karzai has stated that American help in restarting the peace process is a condition for the security pact.

Both the government of Afghanistan as well as the US have to work jointly in order to bring stability and security to the country. If both parties work in isolation, it would not bear fruit, and may result in the further deterioration of diplomatic relations and security conditions. Afghan political stability has always had a resonating effect on the security situation in South Asia, West Asia and Central Asia. Both Washington and Kabul have to realise the importance of Afghanistan's internal problems to the regional security

Afghanistan: When India and China Touch Base

J Jeganaathan

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India and China recently held a bilateral meeting on Afghanistan, for the first time in Beijing, to chart out a joint plan to secure their multi-billion dollar investments in the war ravaged country whose future remains uncertain post US withdrawal in 2014. This cooperative mechanism raises three important questions: What are the prerequisites for such a bilateral mechanism to be more effective and sustainable? Will the Sino-Indian strategic partnership on Afghanistan assuage Pakistan's security concerns, and if yes, then to what extent? Whether it is a stand-alone approach or

part of a grand strategy towards Afghanistan is also a moot question.

Although this bilateral dialogue can be considered as a part of similar bilateral and multilateral endeavours by others including the US, UK, France, Germany, Turkey, India, and Pakistan, it has two unique features. First, it brings together India and China, which are the two great powers of Asia in terms of military capability and politico-economic stability. Second, they hold the largest investment projects in Afghanistan, particularly in the mining sectors. (So far, India had pledged USD 2bn for Afghanistan, whereas China has invested USD 3bn on various mining projects). Thus, it is no surprise that both share common interests as well as concerns in Afghanistan.

During the dialogue, both sides agreed that the Afghan issue raises concerns for regional security, stability, and peace, and also acknowledged the need for regional cooperation and consultation to help Afghanistan achieve independence, peace, and stability. However, the exact outcome of the meeting has not been officially disclosed to the media. Or, it is possible that it might have been overshadowed by the latest Sino-Indian border tension along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in the Ladakh region?

Nevertheless, it is passionately argued, especially by South block, that India should enhance its bilateral relationship with China to focus particularly on Afghanistan since both share common interests, and to secure their large scale investments. By doing so, India will be able to assuage Pakistan's concerns over India's increasing role and presence in Afghanistan, and also secure its men and materials placed in Afghanistan from Pakistan-backed militias.

Security Concerns Entwine Strategic Interests

In a media briefing, Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesperson Hua Chunying stated, "The two sides agreed that the Afghan issue concerns regional security and stability." It signifies that common ground pushed these two powers to cooperate. Primarily, China's security concerns in Afghanistan are two-fold: to secure its investments in Afghanistan after 2014, and to prevent the threat of jihadi spill over from Afghanistan to its western Xinjiang province which has a predominant Uyghur (Muslim) population.

However, China has not yet categorically emphasised its security concerns since it can handle such concerns very well within the scope of its strong bilateral cooperation with Pakistan, an all-weather friend and inevitable factor in Afghanistan affairs, or multilateral frameworks such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO). For China, its grand strategic interests are more important than immediate security concerns in Afghanistan. Once viewed as a 'graveyard of empires', China has started to see Afghanistan as a 'gateway to Central Asia' which will help it to harness energy resources and ensure supply through land routes for the benefit of its economy.

On the contrary, India's immediate concerns are purely security-based; its investments in Afghanistan, as well as the life and integrity of Indians working on various developmental or civilian projects in Afghanistan. In the past, Indian workers including embassy personnel have been brutally targeted by insurgent groups, allegedly supported by Pakistan. Moreover, India is paranoid about Afghanistan becoming a safe haven for terrorist organisations, which have heinous designs against India, particularly in Kashmir.

Unlike China, India can contemplate its strategic interests in Afghanistan only in the long-term perspective, due to the fact that articulation of such interests would instantly raise Pakistan's security

concerns. For now, India's Look West strategy, if there is one, will have to be satisfied by its access to Iran, which can serve as a 'gateway to Central Asia' via Chabahar port in Gulf of Omen to meet its energy interests. Although Afghanistan's stability and security is indelibly linked to India's national security, it will remain a security hotspot for India and continue to haunt its national security.

Thus, the rapprochement on common concerns and shared interests between India and China on Afghanistan is rather superficial, and the asymmetry within could eventually cause a trust dilemma between the two. In the long-run, Pakistan will remain a strategic partner for China's grand strategy in and beyond Afghanistan. What India lacks is the political vision to articulate a grand or regional strategy beyond its national security concerns. Instead of just talking the talk, both should devise a regional strategy for the Afghanistan quagmire.

Annexures

Why is Afghanistan important to India?

New Delhi's challenges and opportunities in Kabul after 2014

D. Suba Chandran

For a long time, strategic analysts in India had been criticizing the foreign policy establishment of India (including the Prime Minister's Office, the Ministry of External Affairs and other related departments) for not paying sufficient attention to the region. New Delhi has tried to address this imbalance during the last decade, enhancing its ties and presence in its immediate and extended neighborhood. From Nepal to Sri Lanka, and from Afghanistan to Myanmar, there has been an added emphasis in dealing with the region.

Afghanistan and Myanmar received the attention of Indian policymakers in particular. There was a push not only in terms of attention and bilateral relations with these two countries, but also an increased presence and support to their governments. Aid to the two countries increased disproportionately. Myanmar is seen as a link in India's larger strategy in Southeast Asia, and Afghanistan is important for its plans in Central Asia.

During the 1980s and 1990s, because of local and regional developments, India had lost contact with the governments and people in these two countries. Now, New Delhi is trying to re-establish the old ties.

Although India's investment in and aid to Afghanistan may appear less significant compared with the US and the EU, for India it is substantial. From building infrastructural networks to schools and hospitals, New Delhi has invested substantially in helping the government in Kabul and its people. The first major challenge for India in the post-2014 Afghanistan would be to protect this investment.

Secondly, like all other countries in the region and the rest of international community, India would like to see a stable and democratic government in Afghanistan. New Delhi has established substantial linkages with the Karzai government including a strategic partnership. It would like to strengthen this relationship further and not want any future governments to rupture or sever these ties, as had happened during the mid and late 1990s, when India lost all contacts with Afghanistan.

When an Indian passenger flight was hijacked from Kathmandu to Kandahar, it did not even have basic official communications with the government in Kabul. In future, India would like to avoid such a situation.

Today, despite all criticisms and cynicisms, Afghanistan is certainly better than it was during the late 1990s. Substantial investments have been made in every sector – from building local capacity, security forces to even a political understanding between various sub-nations within Afghanistan. India would prefer that this process continues and the positive developments in the last 10 years do not get reversed because of violence.

A section in India is also apprehensive of Afghanistan becoming a center of radical ideology and violence again. Such a development would also affect Pakistan, and would inevitably reach India and spread further to other countries – Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and even Myanmar. Such a development would not only undermine the stability of the Af-Pak region, but also the entire Central Asia-South Asia-Southeast Asia belt.

In particular, New Delhi would prefer the Afghan security forces remain stable and do not crumble because of any future onslaughts from insurgent groups. While India would be willing to assist the Afghan security forces in their training and it even supplies some anti-insurgency equipment, New Delhi is unlikely to send its troops into Afghanistan, even if there is a specific request from Kabul.

India also sees Afghanistan as an essential component of the TAPI (Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India) pipeline. To address its energy needs to sustain its economic growth, pipelines from Iran and Central Asia would be extremely important. The general fear in India is that an unstable Afghanistan would hurt the construction of this pipeline and the subsequent flow of gas.

Finally, a section in India is extremely apprehensive of Pakistan attempting to scuttle India's presence and influence in Afghanistan. Every country in the region and elsewhere, depending on their interest and investment, would like to exert an element of presence and influence in Afghanistan, including Pakistan, because of its geographical proximity. While New Delhi should appreciate this, what it is afraid of is Islamabad and Rawalpindi playing a negative role in Afghanistan to undermine India's investments.

While no country including India would like to deny Pakistan's proximity and cultural linkages with Afghanistan, none, including New Delhi, would be comfortable with Islamabad abusing its leverage to install a puppet regime in Kabul, or undermine an existing framework, as had happened during the 1990s. In fact, a section even within Pakistan would be against such an approach. But the greatest question is what strategies to adopt if Pakistan decides to pursue a negative agenda in Afghanistan?

While Pakistan would like the rest of international community to understand its own fears and concerns in Afghanistan, the opposite is also equally true.

Since there is a widespread understanding at the regional level on the importance of a stable Afghanistan, can Kabul become a bridge bringing the countries of the region together?

The TAPI pipeline is likely to be a major connector, linking Central Asia with South Asia, especially Afghanistan, Pakistan and India. The Asian Development Bank has agreed to be the advisor for the project recently and the countries have agreed on the transit fees. The US on the other hand, is engaged in a dialogue process with Iran and there is a nuclear deal in the process. As a result, the Iran-Pakistan-India (IPI) pipeline is likely to face less opposition from the US. Both these pipelines are likely to change the energy future of Central and South Asia.

Afghanistan is also extremely interested in becoming the transit country for not only gas, but also an electricity grid. The CASA 1000 is a parallel initiative, linking Central Asia and South Asia, especially Afghanistan and Pakistan, with the electricity grid in Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan.

Afghanistan and Pakistan are likely to become a major transit routes for pipelines and electricity grids. For India, there are threats and opportunities in Afghanistan. A stable Afghanistan is in everyone's interests and the regional security is intrinsically enmeshed with it.

Source: The Friday Times, 24 January 2014

Afghan survival after 2014

The country has recovered enough to walk on its own

D. Suba Chandran

WILL there be a civil war in Afghanistan once the international security forces leave the country in 2014? There is a perception that the Karzai government will not be able to survive the withdrawal and will collapse, leading to a civil war resulting in the Taliban taking over. How plausible is such a scenario in 2014, or after that?

While this perception has been there ever since Obama announced his exit strategy, the current ground situation in Afghanistan, positive developments in the past decade and, more importantly, the widespread self-belief in the Afghan community do not support such a breakdown either in 2014 or in the near future thereafter. Of course, there are other critical non-security challenges, for example better governance and stable economy, which should be the primary focus of international debate, but certainly not whether Afghanistan will survive.

In assessing the security situation, the first come the Afghan forces. The army and police are better trained and armed today than in the 1990s. While the Taliban onslaught was supported by Pakistan, the Afghan regime in the mid-1990s was poorly trained and equipped, and highly divided. Though Ahmed Shah Massoud led the troops, the hard reality for him while fighting the Taliban was his troops were divided, poorly trained and worse, insufficiently equipped.

Today the situation is the opposite. Thanks to the international support in training, recruiting and arming, the Afghan forces are better placed to deal with any security situation, especially fighting the Taliban. They are better equipped with mobility and communication. The command and control in

the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) runs better today.

In recent years there have been multiple success stories of Afghan forces taking care of situations. One can now hardly see any foreign troops patrolling the streets of Kabul. The Afghan army and police are present all over the city. The ANSF is not only willing, but also ready to take charge. The transformation has already taken place.

On the other hand, the Taliban now is not what it was. While they could earlier organise suicide attacks and ambush troops at will, their military capabilities today seem to be considerably damaged. The fact they are using more suicide attacks shows the decline in their conventional capabilities. Besides, the Taliban cannot take Pakistan's support for granted as they did in the 1990s. The international community will be closely watching Islamabad.

Even within Pakistan, the opinion is divided on what role they should play. With the Pakistani Taliban wreaking havoc within, the opinion is unlikely to support any misadventure in terms of supporting the Taliban militarily.

Finally, the international security forces, especially the US troops, are not likely to leave Afghanistan altogether. Though the US and Karzai have differences over the bilateral security arrangement, Afghanistan is likely to agree to it. As a result, there will be residual American presence, especially for handling electronic surveillance and some air support. Militarily, Afghanistan is thus unlikely to collapse.

Infrastructure and governance, however, are a mixed situation. There have been numerous non-military developments all over Afghanistan. The country today is not what the Taliban left when they fled in 2002. From road infrastructure to mobile connectivity and electricity, there have been many positive stories. Never has Afghanistan seen so much of road infrastructure as today – in terms of kilometres built since 2001-02 as well as quality.

Mobile connectivity and electricity too are similarly developed. Of course, there is a long way to go in completing the electrification of the entire country.

The international community has also succeeded in building local capacity. Compared to 2001-02, the achievement in building local capacities from maintaining books to distributing aid has been significant, given that everything had to be raised from scratch. There is also a civilian and private component in most sectors. This means there is a vested interest in maintaining the existing framework.

Of course, the critics are correct about bad governance, drugs, corruption and the role of warlords. Karzai could have done better on these counts, and has to be held accountable. However, to be fair to him, he has succeeded in building a coalition and maintaining a regime, which never existed before. He bargained even with the devil to run his government. But we have to keep in mind the circumstances in which he took over.

Besides, expecting Karzai to establish a stable and democratic Afghanistan is asking for the moon. In fact, a stable and democratic Afghanistan would be a historic anomaly. Which period of Afghan history would one want Karzai to replicate?

Will Afghanistan be able to sustain itself economically after 2014? Will Karzai or his successor be able to run the government once the international economic support starts going down? This is a billion-dollar question.

There are a few positive developments on this front as well. The Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India pipeline seems to be closer to getting realised than in the previous years. The four countries have signed the gas sale and purchase agreements. In a regional meeting in Central Asia earlier this year, they agreed to fast-track the process in confidence building on infrastructural networks. The Asian Development Bank has agreed to be the financial adviser to the project.

Besides the pipeline, Afghanistan has also been working on building an electricity network linking Central Asia and South Asia (CASA 1000). There is yet another initiative involving Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Afghanistan and Pakistan to network the power grid. These developments will help Afghanistan's economy as a transit country.

If the next government succeeds in getting electricity and gas, the country could expect more investment to sustain the economy.

Besides such calculations, the Afghans across board strongly believe they would succeed. Compared to 12 years ago, there is a middle class and youth bulge, both believing in the future. Afghanistan would certainly not fail nor collapse.

The international community should appreciate the above transitions and change the debate – from a civil war discourse to finalising Afghanistan's transformation. The nature of its survival depends on continuing regional and international interests in stabilising it.

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