

NO GOOD OPTIONS IN AFGHANISTAN

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: Effect of policies and politics of developed & developing countries on India's interests

During the last 50 years, Afghanistan has been through different governance systems — monarchy till 1973; communist type rule, initially home-grown and then imposed by the U.S.S.R. with its 1979 intervention; jihadi warlordism in the early 1990s; shariat-based Taliban rule; and a democratic republic based on a presidential system since 2004. Wracked by a growing Taliban insurgency, peace today remains elusive. Reconciliation with the Taliban is increasingly projected as the way forward. But 'reconciliation' means different things to different players and to different groups of Afghans.

The U.S. began its operations in Afghanistan, primarily against the al-Qaeda, 18 years ago. As it set about creating new institutional structures in Afghanistan, supported by the international community, U.S. troop presence began to grow. From a few thousand in 2002, the numbers increased and stabilised around 20,000 between 2004 and 2006 when they started climbing. By 2010, it had spiked to 1,00,000, dropping to 10,000 in 2016 and currently numbers around 15,000. The cumulative cost has been over \$800 billion on U.S. deployments and \$105 billion on rebuilding Afghanistan, with nearly 2,400 American soldiers dead.

U.S. President Donald Trump's policy announced in August 2017 was aimed at breaking the military stalemate by authorising a small increase in U.S. presence, removing operational constraints, putting Pakistan on notice, improving governance and strengthening the capabilities of Afghan security forces. Within a year, the policy failure was apparent. Afghan government continued to lose territory and today controls less than half the country. Since 2015, Afghan security forces have suffered 45,000 casualties with over 3,000 civilians killed every year.

Last year, U.S. senior officials travelled to Doha to open talks with the Taliban, followed by the appointment of Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad as Special Representative for Afghan Reconciliation. Five rounds of talks have been held and a sixth is likely soon. Mr. Khalilzad is seeking guarantees that the Taliban will not provide safe haven to terrorist groups such as al-Qaeda and Afghan territory will not be used to launch strikes against the U.S., while the Taliban have demanded a date for U.S. withdrawal along with the release of all Taliban detainees in Guantánamo and Afghanistan. Mr. Khalilzad has also sought a ceasefire in Afghanistan and engagement in an intra-Afghan dialogue in return. The Taliban have responded with their new spring offensive, al-Fath, and refuse to engage with the Afghan government. An intra-Afghan dialogue with political and civil society leaders planned for around the third week of this month in Doha was called off on account of the presence of Afghan officials.

It is clear that Mr. Khalilzad is not negotiating peace in Afghanistan; he is negotiating a managed U.S. exit. Given the blood and treasure expended, the optics of the exit is important. As former U.S. Defence Secretary J. Mattis said, "The U.S. doesn't lose wars, it loses interest".

There is growing polarisation in Afghanistan along ethnic and even sectarian divides. With three presidential elections (in 2004, 2009 and 2014) and three parliamentary elections (in 2005, 2010 and 2018), faith in the electoral process and the election machinery has eroded.

The 2009 presidential election showed the growing mistrust between then President Hamid Karzai and Washington. The U.S. kept pushing Mr. Karzai to agree to a second round between him and his rival Abdullah Abdullah despite Mr. Karzai's insistence that he had won more than 50% votes in the first round. After months of wrangling when Mr. Karzai agreed, Dr. Abdullah

backed out and Mr. Karzai felt that his second term had been tarnished.

The 2014 election yielded a disputed result with neither Ashraf Ghani nor Dr. Abdullah willing to concede. Despite an audit, results were never declared. Instead, the U.S.-backed political compromise produced a National Unity Government (NUG) with Ashraf Ghani as President and Dr. Abdullah as CEO, a position never legitimised by the promised constitutional amendment. The NUG has aggravated polarisation and has often found itself paralysed.

The 2019 presidential election, due in April has been postponed twice, to July and now to September 28. This may have been pushed by the U.S. to give time to Mr. Khalilzad for his talks, but any further postponement will not be accepted by the people in view of the eroding legitimacy of the NUG.

Parliamentary elections due in 2015 were finally held in October 2018 even though the promised electoral reforms remained unimplemented. Under the circumstances, the results have yet to be declared six months later, further delegitimising the process. Together with the deteriorating security situation, the prospects for a credible and legitimate election in September seem remote.

This is why there is growing support among certain Afghan sections for an interim government. Such an arrangement would prepare the ground for fresh elections after constitutional amendments and electoral reforms using the Loya Jirga process over the next two years. Expectedly, this is strongly opposed by the more secular and liberal Afghan groups, including women, which see any such move as a step back from the democratic principles of the 2004 constitution. The real risk is that as Western funding for salaries and equipment dries up and political legitimacy of Kabul erodes, the cohesiveness of the Afghan security forces will be impacted.

Just as there is no domestic consensus on the terms of reconciliation with Taliban, there is a breakdown of regional consensus too. Mr. Khalilzad met with his Russian and Chinese counterparts in Moscow where the three reiterated support for “an inclusive Afghan-led, Afghan-owned peace process”. However, there is no common understanding of what it means or which Afghans should own and lead the process. The NUG feels abandoned and has blamed Mr. Khalilzad of betraying the Afghan government; the U.S. has demanded an apology from the Afghan NSA, Hamdullah Mohib, for his outburst against the U.S.

Moscow has its own format for talks and is convinced that the U.S.-backed experiment of the NUG needs to end — the sooner the better. Chinese interest is primarily with securing its Xinjiang province and the Belt and Road Initiative projects in the region. Iran maintains its own lines with the Taliban even as elements of the Syria returned, battle-hardened Fatemiyoun brigade have given it additional leverage.

Pakistan is once again centre-stage as the country with maximum leverage. To demonstrate its support, Pakistan released Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, a leader and founder of the Taliban, after keeping him in custody for nearly nine years. Ironically, he was picked up because he had opened direct talks with the Karzai government a decade ago and the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) was furious when it learnt about it. The ISI's investment in providing safe haven to the Taliban for 18 years is finally paying off as the U.S. negotiates its exit while the Taliban negotiate their return. A sense of triumphalism was visible in Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan's recent statement suggesting the formation of an interim government in Kabul to overcome the hurdles in the Doha talks provoking a furious backlash from Afghanistan from the government and the opposition figures. Even Mr. Khalilzad dubbed the statement as ‘inappropriate’. Pakistan has since backtracked but it shows that old habits die hard.

Even without getting into details of why the post-Bonn order in Afghanistan is fraying, there is agreement that peace in Afghanistan cannot be restored by military action. It is also clear that a prolonged U.S. military presence is not an answer. The problem is that a U.S. withdrawal will end the U.S. war in Afghanistan but without a domestic and regional consensus, it will not bring peace to Afghanistan. Sadly, today there are no good options in Afghanistan.

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