

INDIA'S OPTIONS AND THE PASHTUN FACTOR

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It's rightly being pointed out that India has to be prepared for the potential consequences of the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan. While New Delhi is weighing its options it must take into account that for all its antipathy toward the Afghan Taliban, the latter does represent, in a distorted form, a facet of Pashtun nationalism. What has given added potency to the Taliban's appeal is this: its ability to couch in religious terminology traditional Pashtun aspirations for dominance in Afghanistan as well as the aversion of Pashtun tribes to foreign interference in their land.

It is the combination of ultra-orthodox Islam, a product of Saudi involvement in the so-called Afghan "jihad", with Pashtunwali, the traditional Pashtun social code, and opposition to foreign presence that provides strength to the Taliban. Most Pashtuns, who comprise over 40% of the population of Afghanistan, believe that they are the rightful rulers of the country. They base this on the history of the past 300 years when Pashtun dynasties ruled Afghanistan almost throughout. While the Persian-speaking Tajiks, who form around a quarter of the population, are more urban and educated than the Pashtun tribes and staffed a substantial portion of the Afghan bureaucracy, the ruling dynasties were invariably Pashtun.

This situation changed with the American invasion in 2001 aided by the largely Tajik Northern Alliance that shifted the locus of power out of Pashtun hands. The emergence of the Pashtun Taliban from Kandahar in 1994 was in reaction partly to the fear of Tajik domination and partly to the mayhem and anarchy caused by the "mujahideen" factions fighting each other for control of the country. With Pakistan's military help the predominantly Pashtun Taliban imposed a degree of order and ruled approximately three-quarters of Afghanistan from 1996 to 2001.

Pashtun resentment against foreign intervention, which drove their opposition to the Soviet invasion and now fuels antipathy towards American military presence, also has a long history going back to their resistance to British intrusion during the 19th century. It was augmented by British success in dividing the Pashtun lands in eastern and southeastern Afghanistan and drawing the Durand Line that attached a large portion to British India, now Pakistan. This drastically reduced Pashtun demographic superiority in Afghanistan. Opposition to the Durand Line was the principal reason why Afghanistan voted against Pakistan's admission to the UN in 1947.

Traditionally, Pashtun nationalism in Afghanistan was based on ethnicity and tribal loyalties and not connected to religion, which explains their hostility toward predominantly Muslim Pakistan during the first three decades of its existence. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979 fundamentally changed the nature of Pashtun nationalism. It led to American and Saudi support for the Afghan insurgency, with Pakistan acting as the conduit for American arms and Saudi financial support to the tribes fighting the Soviets and their proxy government in Kabul. It also led to the import of Saudi-Wahhabi ideology through madrasas set up with Saudi funding on the Pakistan-Afghanistan border. These madrasas produced the first generation of the Taliban.

Simultaneously, the Soviet invasion altered the nature of Pakistan's relationship with Pashtun nationalism, turning it from hostility to support. This process culminated with the installation of the Taliban regime in Kabul in 1996 with Pakistan's military aid. It provided Pakistan with strategic depth in the event of a future conflict with India. Equally important, Pakistan's support to this religiously inspired manifestation of Pashtun nationalism largely solved the problem of Pashtun irredentism within Pakistan.

Although polls show that the majority of Afghans do not support the Taliban, the divided and infirm nature of the nominally ruling dispensation and its corruption and inefficiency have helped the Taliban gain renewed support among parts of the Pashtun population. Added to this is the vicarious satisfaction that many Pashtuns feel at the Taliban's defiance of the Kabul government, making it a viable force in Afghanistan.

The resurgent Taliban is driven not so much by Islam as the quest for Pashtun dignity and revenge. While it is not in a position to rule over the entire country, and certainly not the urban areas, it does control large swathes of the rural areas in the predominantly Pashtun provinces of eastern and southeastern Afghanistan. In other words, it is in a position to make the country ungovernable and indefinitely continue the civil war especially because of its control of the drug trade that finances its activities. The withdrawal of American forces will provide it greater opportunity to expand its area of operation.

It is important that New Delhi takes this factor into account while fashioning its policy toward Afghanistan in anticipation of American withdrawal. India's refusal to publicly criticise, let alone denounce, the Soviet invasion of 1979, while understandable in that particular geopolitical context and a consequence of India's gratitude for Soviet support during the Bangladesh war, ended up doing India great harm in the eyes of its traditional friends in Afghanistan, the Pashtuns. It also provided Pakistan greater scope to curry favour with Afghanistan's largest and traditionally dominant ethnic group.

It will take a great deal of creative thinking and imaginative refashioning of New Delhi's policy towards Afghanistan for India to recover lost ground *vis-à-vis* the Pashtuns. Depending on the U.S., itself on the verge of cutting its losses in Afghanistan, or on other powers such as Russia and Iran to protect Indian interests in that country will be foolhardy and counter-productive.

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