

SEEKING A MANAGED EXIT

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Afghanistan [President Ashraf Ghani was in New Delhi on September 19](#) for a day-long working visit. A short press release indicates the low-key nature of the visit. The reason is simple — the growing sense of uncertainty that prevails. Presumably, Prime Minister Narendra Modi took up the issue of seven engineers working for KEC International who remain missing after being kidnapped this May, and Mr. Ghani would have assured him about Kabul's sincere efforts to rescue them. Pro forma references to the Strategic Partnership and the New Development Partnership were made but there were no new announcements. India reiterated its support for 'an Afghan-led, Afghan-owned and Afghan-controlled peace and reconciliation process' with the Taliban though it is clear that the strings are being manipulated from other capitals.

Afghanistan Ambassador to India quits

A year after U.S. President Donald Trump unveiled his new Afghanistan policy, the stalemate continues. Incidents of violence and civilian casualties keep going up. There have been high profile attacks in recent months in Farah, Baghlan and Ghazni in addition to suicide attacks in Kabul claimed by the Islamic State (IS). The Taliban leadership and the Haqqani network retain their sanctuaries in Pakistan and enjoy the support of the Inter Services Intelligence (ISI). In terms of population under control, there has been a slow erosion and the hold of the Kabul government is now limited to 56%. Repeated offers of talks by Mr. Ghani have been rebuffed by the Taliban, except for a three-day ceasefire during Eid in June. Parliamentary elections due since 2015 are unlikely to be held in October as announced. Presidential elections are due in April 2019. The experiment of the National Unity Government has not worked and the prospects of the 2019 election yielding an outcome that is seen as legitimate appear remote. All key players, including the U.S., have now opened their own communication lines with the Taliban.

The objectives of the U.S. policy announced last year were to break the military stalemate on the ground by expanding both the presence and the role of the U.S. and NATO forces in Afghanistan. Operational constraints in terms of calling for surveillance and air support were eased. The Obama approach of announcing timelines for withdrawing U.S. troops from Afghanistan was replaced by a conditions-based approach. Pakistan was put on notice with Mr. Trump tweeting about Pakistan's duplicity in being "a non-NATO ally" and providing safe haven to insurgent groups. Earlier this month, the U.S. announced that it was cancelling \$300 million in military aid to Pakistan. However, it is clear that U.S.'s Pakistan policy, which has oscillated for 17 years between cajoling using pay-offs and punishing by withholding or cancelling pay-offs, has once again failed to change Pakistan's behaviour.

'Will return home and work for peace,' says Shaida Mohammad Abdali

Slowly, the U.S. is realising the uncomfortable truth that it is unable to change Pakistan's policy because Pakistan's security establishment does not find such a shift in its interest. The Pakistani military and the ISI do not support the idea of a territorially united, peaceful and stable Afghanistan, never mind the public statements at international conferences. At the same time, the ISI is unlikely to support the idea of a complete Taliban takeover in Afghanistan. It remembers that after the jihad in the 1980s, when the Mujahideen leaders finally took control in Afghanistan in 1992 after the Najibullah government fell, they stopped listening to the ISI even as they started fighting among themselves. This led to the emergence of the Taliban, assisted and nurtured by Pakistan. The ISI prefers a controlled instability in Afghanistan where the Taliban enjoys some power but wants more as this keeps the group dependent on the ISI.

The U.S. is unable to get out of this bind as long as it maintains a significant military presence in Afghanistan and therefore remains dependent on communication and supply routes through Pakistan. It is unable to take stronger measures such as directly targeting the insurgent safe havens in Pakistan, terminating its status as “a non-NATO ally”, sanctioning specific military officers or considering placing Pakistan on the list of ‘state sponsors of terrorism’. The U.S.’s dependence provides the security establishment in Pakistan a degree of influence in the corridors of power in Washington that has enabled it to receive over \$33 billion over the last 17 years, despite the ups and downs in what can only be described as an unhappy marriage that neither side is able to terminate.

This is why [Mr. Trump’s earlier objective of “winning” in Afghanistan](#) has been quietly put aside. The U.S. appears to be seeking a managed exit, leaving after a successfully conducted election so that the blood (2,400 U.S. lives) and treasure (nearly \$1 trillion) can be justified as having delivered an honourable outcome. For the outcome to last, at least for some time, the insurgency needs to be curbed. Having failed to defeat it through kinetic means, the U.S. opened direct talks with the Taliban two months ago. In the past, the U.S. had refrained from doing so, maintaining that this would undermine the legitimacy of the Kabul government. It had therefore prodded Pakistan to deliver the Taliban to an ‘Afghan-led and Afghan-owned’ reconciliation process which did not happen.

Afghanistan, on a slow fuse

The first round in July, in Qatar, with State Department senior official Alice Wells was preliminary. The talks were explained as intended to judge if the Taliban is serious and thereby ‘facilitate’ direct talks with the Afghan government. It has also expressed concern about the growing presence of the IS. Last week, the Taliban made it clear that its demands include release of Taliban prisoners held in U.S. custody and a closure of U.S. bases in Afghanistan. With the appointment of former U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan Zalmay Khalilzad as Special Adviser, talks with the Taliban are likely to intensify.

The IS argument was used by Russia to open up direct talks with the Taliban more than a year ago. Iran has its own channels to the Taliban. Both Russia and Iran believe that notwithstanding the ideological affinity, turf battles will ensure that the Taliban will resent the Arab-dominated IS. This happened in August in Jowzjan, where after a pitched battle, 250 IS cadres chose to surrender to the Afghan authorities rather than face summary justice at the hands of the Taliban. With U.S. encouragement, Uzbekistan has also entertained senior Taliban leaders in Tashkent to persuade them to engage in talks with Kabul. Concerned about Uighur militants, China is planning to train and equip an Afghan brigade to be deployed in Badakhshan even as it seeks Taliban help in securing its China-Pakistan Economic Corridor projects. This has given the Taliban a new legitimacy — exactly as Pakistan had wanted. With the emergence of the IS, a distinction between good Taliban and bad Taliban is no longer necessary.

Realising that the end game is approaching, the Taliban too has changed tack. In the areas under its control, instead of destroying the schools, clinics and courts, it is running them by co-opting or replacing local officials who remain on the government’s payroll. It realises that it needs to emerge from being a shadowy underground insurgency and demonstrate governance skills. Mr. Ghani would like to stand again in 2019, this time as a candidate who brought peace to Afghanistan, though with so many different players pulling in different directions, peace will remain illusory. What is likely is that after the 2019 election, the U.S. will get its managed exit, which Mr. Trump will trumpet as his singular achievement.

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