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The Emerging Faultlines of the US-Afghan Strategic Partnership

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Abstract

The United States (US) and Afghanistan are locked in discussions to finalise a long-term security agreement that would pave the way for retention of limited US troop presence in the country beyond 2014. The secrecy surrounding the ongoing deliberations on the yet-to-be-inked US-Afghan Strategic Partnership is causing considerable disquiet both within and outside Afghanistan. However, the deal, which is seen as a security guarantee to the Afghans, seems to be mired in the emerging differences on the conditionalities and nature of the partnership. Notwithstanding the current state of discussions, the strategic partnership will have long-term implications for both Afghanistan and the region.

Introduction

Since early this year, officials of the US and Afghanistan have met on several occasions, keeping such meetings far from the glaring eyes of the media, to finalise a long-term security agreement. The agreement termed as the 'US-Afghan Strategic Partnership' would pave the way for retention of approximately 20,000 to 30,000 US troops in Afghanistan beyond 2014, the cut-off

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year for the withdrawal of all US troops from the war-torn country. These remaining troops, based in at least five bases (termed as ‘joint facilities’)² in Afghanistan for the next two or three decades, would conduct specialised counter-terrorism operations and provide secondary support to the Afghan forces. According to reports from the field, the locations identified for the joint facilities are: Herat province, along the Iranian border; Mazar-e Sharif in the north; Kandahar in the south; and Jalalabad in the east, towards Pakistan.³

Drawdown of the US forces from Afghanistan began in July 2011 and, according to the announced plan, by the end of 2012, 33,000 troops would have returned home. However, even with the commencement of the drawdown, neither the reconciliation process with the Taliban has made any substantial progress nor have the Afghan forces shown any extraordinary signs of being able to take the lead in the country’s security. The Taliban insurgency, on the other hand, has stepped up its campaign of violent retribution and targeted killings of the top political leadership, government and police officials both in northern and southern Afghanistan to create a ‘crisis of confidence’ and ‘power vacuum’ of sorts as security handovers occurred in seven earmarked areas in July 2011.

Taliban Campaign of Violent Retribution and Internal Power Struggles

Violence against civilians has reached a record high in Afghanistan this year, with more than 1,400 civilians killed in the conflict till June 2011, according to a recently released UN report.⁴ The Taliban insurgency is responsible for 80 per cent of civilian casualties, with 14 per cent caused by NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization) and Afghan forces. On 29 July 2011, a roadside bomb killed 18 civilians in southern Helmand province. The minivan carrying the civilians hit an explosive device in Nahri Saraji district.

In the month of July 2011, insurgents managed to carry out three major assassinations, employing suicide attackers to eliminate Ahmed Wali Karzai, half brother of President Hamid Karzai, and presidential aide Jan Mohammed Khan. Both Ahmed Wali and Jan Mohammad were influential power brokers in southern Afghanistan. The third person killed was Ghulam Haider Hamidi, mayor of the restive Kandahar province. While the killing of Ahmed Wali and Hamidi

² The term ‘joint facilities’ is used to dispel suspicion and opposition to the strategic bases both inside and outside Afghanistan. Discussions with key Afghan officials in May-June 2011 and US officials in Washington D.C. in May 2011.

³ Joshua Partlow, Talks on long-term Afghan-U.S. partnership stalled, *The Washington Post* (29 July 2011), http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia-pacific/talks-on-long-term-afghan-us-partnership-stalled/2011/07/27/gIQAAX0Afl_story.html. Accessed on 30 July 2011.

⁴ ‘Afghanistan: Mid Year Report on the Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict 2011’, *UNHCR*, July 2011, <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/country,,,AFG,4562d8cf2,4e1ee1b52,0.html>. Accessed on 1 August 2011.

took place in the restive Kandahar city, Jan Mohammad's killing occurred in the outskirts of the national capital Kabul.

On 28 July 2011, the Taliban added another successful attack to their list of achievements. A daredevil and well-coordinated bomb and suicide attack involving multiple attackers in Uruzgan province killed 21 people. Some of the areas like Lashkar Gah in the southern Helmand province have witnessed a series of violent incidents.

The three major assassinations in less than a month created a power vacuum in southern Afghanistan and has consequently eroded President Karzai's support base among the Pushtuns, particularly among the Populzai tribe he belongs to. Another important potential implication for the south would be the intra-ethno-tribal rivalry and power struggle that is likely to ensue. The Afghans are quick to point out the role of former warlord Gul Agha Sherzai in these killings. If Sherzai, belonging to the Barakzai tribe, gets appointed as governor of Kandahar, it would be an indication of dwindling support and influence of the Karzai clan.

Seen in the context of the ongoing reconciliation process with the Taliban, these targeted killings both in the south and north also represent marginalisation of those who have either opposed the reconciliation process or have gained significant clout of their own. Following the killing of police commander Gen Mohammed Daoud Daoud in northern Takhar province in May 2011, there have been apprehensions that those opposed to the reconciliation process or have been effective in neutralising the Taliban are being targeted and eliminated. The community elders and officials in Mazar-e-Sharif, the capital of the northern province of Balkh, indicate that the targeted killings have been intended to marginalise them in the future power-sharing agreement with the Taliban. As a result, revival plans for the now defunct Northern Alliance as a hedge against such marginalisation is gaining ground.⁵

Kabul has always been Pushtun dominated. These killings not only mark a shift in the power structures but also indicate the growing distrust among the ethnic groups in the country. The realignment of forces could pose a significant obstacle to the reconciliation process. Most northern groups reject reconciliation with the Taliban and emphasise on the need for an intra-Afghan reconciliation. They have been increasingly questioning the Pushtun-dominated polity and critical of Karzai's highly centralised presidency, are unsure of the reconciliation process, have raised the issue of sanctuary and are concerned by the waning international support.⁶

⁵ In Takhar, the insurgents had published a hit list of several prominent former Northern Alliance leaders like Atta Noor, Dr Abdullah, Marshal Fahim, Yunus Qanooni, Ahmad Zia Masood, Ustad Mohaqiq, Amranullah Saleh and other similarly prominent leaders. Author's discussions with community elders, officials and person on the street narratives during field visit to Mazar-e-Sharif, Afghanistan in June 2010.

⁶ Author's discussion with participants at the international workshop 'Conflict and peace building in Afghanistan: current situation and prospects', 5-6 July 2011, Dushanbe.

The Taliban insurgency is actively exploiting the intra- and inter-ethnic distrust, tribal differences, business rivalries and other such local grievances to their advantage. Following the spate of killings and violence, many fear that the present regime could strike a power-sharing arrangement with the Taliban. Amidst such fears and the rapid pace of disengagement of the West, the Afghans are concerned that the gains made thus far would be lost and exploited by neighbouring powers. Even then, finalising a plan that envisions limited US troop presence almost indefinitely can be tricky and controversial. Moreover, the secrecy shrouding over the talks between the officials of both countries is adding to the disquiet, both within and outside Afghanistan.

The Emerging Differences and Conditions of the Strategic Partnership

Publicly, American officials deny the establishment of strategic bases or presence of the US troops beyond 2014. The new US ambassador in Kabul, Ryan Crocker, has said: 'The United States has no interest in creating permanent military bases in Afghanistan and does not want to use the country as a platform to influence neighbouring countries.'⁷ However, the choice of ambivalent words by Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton that Washington did not want any 'permanent' bases in Afghanistan, allows the US to explore a variety of possible arrangements.⁸

In the negotiations on the partnership treaty so far, the Afghans seem to be playing a delicate balancing game. They have rejected the first draft prepared by the US in its entirety, preferring to draft their own proposal. President Karzai and senior officials see an enduring American presence and broader strategic relationship as essential, in part to protect Afghanistan from the onslaught of the insurgency and its meddlesome neighbours and also to the survival of the present regime. At the same time, in newfound assertiveness, they have made it clear that Afghanistan will sign a long-term deal only if the US meets conditions set by the Afghans.

Some of the main contentious issues laid out by the Afghans are: (a) the foreign troops should work within the Afghan legal framework; (b) they should not take prisoners or conduct night raids; (c) they must not own private prisons; (d) they have to equip the Afghan air force with F-16 fighter jets and Abrams tanks; and (e) US troops cannot launch operations outside Afghanistan from these bases, thus precluding the possibility of Abbottabad-type raids that killed

⁷ No permanent U.S. bases in Afghanistan: U.S. ambassador, *Reuters* (25 July 2011), <http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/07/25/us-afghanistan-usa-ambassador/idUSTRE76O0Y320110725?feedType=RSS&feedName=topNews&rpc=71>. Accessed on 27 July 2011.

⁸ However, in private discussions the US officials are not averse to the idea of retaining limited troop presence beyond 2014. Jason Burke, Secret US and Afghanistan talks could see troops stay for decades, *The Guardian* (13 June 2011), <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/jun/13/us-afghanistan-secret-talks-on-security-partnership>. Accessed on 15 June 2011.

Osama bin Laden.⁹ Many of these conditions, however, are directed at blunting domestic opposition and conspiracy theories in the region on prolonged US presence.

Both countries are struggling to bridge the growing gap between their demands. Afghan officials appear particularly worried that as the US troop withdrawal accelerates, Washington's commitment to paying large sums of money long into the future to support Afghanistan's security forces will diminish.¹⁰ The Afghans want the US to fund their security forces well into the future, despite estimates that the cost to Washington of such support in 2014 would be about US\$8 billion. Though President Karzai has publicly stated that the Afghan government would be able to fund its own army from the newly discovered rich mineral trove estimated at US\$1 trillion, there are several limitations for an aid-dependent country like Afghanistan to carry out mineral exploitation in areas of deteriorating security.

Differences have also emerged on the pace of negotiations. The Americans would like to seal the deal early and to reassure the Afghans that they are not going to abandon them as they did in the 1990s. An early deal would also be some sort of security guarantee against the possible takeover of Afghanistan by the Taliban and would ward off interference by neighbours who continue to support the insurgency with the hope of installing their proxies in Kabul. President Karzai, on the other hand, worries that the talk of the permanent presence of the US troops would be an impediment in negotiations with the Taliban who demand complete withdrawal of foreign forces as a precondition for talks.

Sceptics are quick to point out how such an important partnership, which will decide future US military and economic assistance, has been kept out of the public debate. They forewarn against rushing into a deal. At the same time, they want the US to ensure that it receives meaningful commitment from Kabul in return to address political reform and issues of governance and corruption.¹¹

Internal Opposition and Regional Concerns

While a continuing US military presence would fend off direct interference by neighbours, it might also encourage them to sponsor a continuing insurgency focused on this 'foreign

⁹ Long-term deal with U.S. must be on Afghan terms: Karzai, *Voice of America* (26 July 2011), <http://www.voanews.com/english/news/asia/south/Long-term-Deal-With-US-Must-be-on-Afghan-Terms-Says-Karzai-126177223.html>. Accessed on 27 July 2011.

¹⁰ Joshua Partlow, Talks on long-term Afghan-U.S. partnership stalled, *The Washington Post* (29 July 2011), http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia-pacific/talks-on-long-term-afghan-us-partnership-stalled/2011/07/27/gIQAX0Afl_story.html. Accessed on 30 July 2011.

¹¹ Caroline Wadhams and Colin Cookman, Negotiating Afghanistan's future, *The Af-Pak Channel*, (2 June 2011), http://afpak.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2011/06/02/negotiating_afghanistans_future. Accessed on 4 June 2011.

presence'. Other apprehensions are that the Afghan state would cede control over foreign policy and thus lose its national sovereignty and that the US presence would simply prop up an Afghan administration that would continue with the present system of corruption, cronyism, patronage and links to the narcotics trade and organised crime.¹² These considerations are weighing heavy on the minds of the Afghans.

It's a Catch-22 situation for the Afghans. During discussions in June 2011, the Afghan officials pointed out the utility of the strategic partnership and, at the same time, were concerned about the long-term US presence in the country. The deal is crucial, for it will ensure that Afghanistan does not fall into Taliban hands even after the majority of the US troops pull out. At the same time, there are also apprehensions that the foreign forces will eternally occupy Afghanistan. Such fears have been articulated by close advisers of President Karzai from parties like Hizb-e-Islami. The Hizb has close alliance with Iran and has stated that the US presence would amount to 'eternal occupation'.¹³

Within the Afghan Parliament, too, President Karzai is in conflict with parliamentarians over plans for a *loya jirga* or grand assembly to discuss future relations with the US. Instead of settling the matter within parliament, where support for Karzai is dwindling, the President wants the issue to be taken to a traditional assembly, which can be manipulated to derive a favourable decision. The parliamentarians for obvious reasons are not pleased with the move that undermines their authority as representatives of the people.¹⁴ It is indeed a tricky business for Karzai and the US to balance the competing interests of the multiple players involved.

These secret negotiations come amid a scramble among regional powers to retain their influence in Afghanistan in a post-US scenario. The strategic partnership allowing the US an indefinite presence in the country offsets these powers' game plans. This indeed could mark the beginning of another great game, which some analysts have already termed as Great Game 3.¹⁵

¹² Khan Mohammad Danishju, Afghans Debate Future US Presence, IWPR's Afghan Recovery Report, No. 395, (5 April 2011), <http://iwpr.net/report-news/afghans-debate-future-us-presence>. Accessed on 10 April 2011.

¹³ Talks on Details of US-Afghan Strategic Deal Ended, Tolo News, (19 July 2011), <http://tolonews.com/en/afghanistan/3409-talks-on-details-of-us-afghan-strategic-deal-ended>. Accessed on 20 July 2011.

¹⁴ Loya jirgas – 'grand assemblies' drawn from people across the country – are periodically convened in Afghanistan to debate important national issues and arrive at a consensus view. A loya jirga was held in 2002, following the ousting of the Taliban regime the year before, and a second was called the following year to approve a new constitution. Maiwand Safi, Afghan Lawmakers Tackle Karzai On Us Deal, IWPR's Afghan Recovery Report, No. 404, (27 July 2011), <http://iwpr.net/report-news/afghan-lawmakers-tackle-karzai-us-deal>. Accessed on 29 July 2011.

¹⁵ Jason Burke, Secret US and Afghanistan talks could see troops stay for decades, *The Guardian* (13 June 2011), <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/jun/13/us-afghanistan-secret-talks-on-security-partnership>. Accessed on 15 June 2011.

Fears of a permanent American presence have been articulated by neighbouring countries like Iran, Russia and China. While Iran and Pakistan are seen to be moving closer, China is watching the developments with some concern. While for the US, the proposed bases are viewed as rare 'strategic assets' in the heart of one of the most unstable regions in the world, bordering not just Pakistan, Iran and China, but central Asia as well as the Persian Gulf, none of these countries see the long-term US presence in Afghanistan favourably. This could lead to these countries to continue their support for proxies, to raise the ante for the US.

Much of Karzai's bargaining capacity, however, remains intrinsically linked to the performance of the Afghan forces against the Taliban in the areas that have passed under their control. If the Taliban is seen to be gaining in its violent campaign of intimidation and retribution, the President might have to accept the deal on Washington's terms. For the US, a limited troop presence would go a long way in preventing the return of the Al Qaeda and its affiliates to the Af-Pak region. In addition, the agreement would also provide it with a deep reach in a region which is perceived to be of growing geo-strategic importance.

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