



Afghanistan & the International Community Limitations of Engagement

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At the Second Bonn Conference in December 2011, the international community pledged to “stay the course” in Afghanistan. The prolonged engagement of the international community, particularly the US, in Afghanistan is necessary for propping up the fragile central government and the security apparatus in its fight against the insurgents. At the same time, the intervention of the international community is required for reaching a political settlement with the Taliban. Finally, continuation of substantial foreign aid is essential for maintaining the Afghan security forces and the Afghan economy, which is completely dependent on foreign aid and spending.

However, there are limitations to the role of the international community, and especially the US, in Afghanistan – in both the short and long-run. This paper will assess these limitations by focussing on three different areas: (i) the impact of the domestic pressures on the short-term and long-term strategies towards Afghanistan; (ii) the Strategic Partnership Agreement (SPA) between

the US and the Afghan government; and (iii) efforts at reaching a settlement with the Taliban.

I DOMESTIC PRESSURE & INTERNATIONAL ENGAGEMENT

Despite all the pledges and commitments made by the international community to support Afghanistan beyond 2014, the financial crisis and the increasing unpopularity of the war in the West is likely to prevent these pledges from turning into reality. A recent survey conducted by the New York Times revealed that the domestic support for the war in the US has dropped significantly, with an increasing number of people believing that the US should no longer be fighting the war in Afghanistan. Increasingly, in the US and in its coalition partners, it is being felt that the war in Afghanistan is going badly. Although, such polls may not affect the US decision to maintain a residual force in the country post-2014, it is likely to have a significant impact on the magnitude of support that the US could provide to Afghanistan in the long-run.

The impact of such domestic pressure can already be felt on the approach of American allies towards Afghanistan, which seems to be dictating policies more than ground realities. For instance, with the Presidential elections in France around the corner, President Nicolas Sarkozy had succumbed to public opinion – which favoured a withdrawal of French troops from Afghanistan at the end of 2012 – and cut short their deployment by a year to 2013.

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It is possible that the French engagement may end in 2012 itself now that François Hollande, who had been calling for a termination of the French involvement in Afghanistan, has come to power. This is likely to hamper NATO's exit strategy and increase the burden on the other NATO members, who are already under severe pressure to cut back their engagement in Afghanistan.

This domestic pressure is also likely to have an impact on the long-term involvement of the international community. Western governments are under increasing pressure to revive the domestic economies than to dole out money to a government, which is largely perceived to be corrupt and inefficient. Sir William Patey, the outgoing UK Ambassador to Afghanistan, recently stated that if concrete steps were not taken by the Afghan government to tackle corruption it would become increasingly difficult for the British government to justify their substantial annual aid to Afghanistan.

The foreign aid granted to Afghanistan is meant to finance both the security as well as the developmental work. The reduction of overall aid will naturally imply that either security or development or both would have to suffer to a certain extent. Simultaneous engagement in developmental and military activities is meant to compliment and consolidate the gains from each, and a cut back of aid will make an already difficult task even tougher.

A decrease in spending on development will undermine plans to develop both civil society and governmental capacities to fill the vacuum post-2014, ultimately achieving self-reliance and self-sufficiency. A reduction in the funding for security carries the obvious implication of a reduction in the numerical strength of the armed forces as well. Such a reduction would make sense only if a

military superiority over the insurgents is achieved or if there has been a significant drop in the levels of violence perpetrated by the insurgents. As neither of the two situations have been achieved, a reduction in the size of the armed forces is certainly likely to tilt the military balance in favour of the insurgents post-2014, leaving the Afghan forces extremely vulnerable, particularly as their responsibilities would be keep increasing.

Substantial cuts have already been announced, which are likely to affect both security and development. The British government announced in its budget that it will cut some 2.4 billion pounds from projected costs on its commitment to Afghanistan between now and 2015 – a decision that clearly reflected the UK decision to scale back operations more quickly than anticipated. The budget for the development agency, USAid has also been slashed by half as compared to its budget in 2010 and is likely to face further tightening by the US Congress. Other aid organizations, like Oxfam also fear budgetary constraints in the future.

The NATO budget for funding the Afghan security has also undergone a strict revision as it has been reduced by two-thirds. From a budget of USD 11.2 billion for 2012, it was recently announced that post-2014, the US and its allies would be able to pay only USD 4.1 billion annually. Naturally, the size of the Afghan National Security Forces is also likely to be reduced as indicated by a recently circulated proposal, which suggested that NATO was looking to cut back the Afghan forces from a targeted 352,000 to 230,000 by 2014. However, there is no clarity on how this amount is going to be distributed between the allies as there is increasing reluctance on the part of some coalition members to fund the Afghan security, at all, beyond 2014.

II

LONG-TERM AMERICAN PRESENCE

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An important aspect of the American long-term strategy vis-à-vis Afghanistan is the SPA, which was recently finalized. However, a number of crucial details have not been finalized or have been kept out of the purview of the pact. The SPA simply states that the US would not abandon Afghanistan and would continue to provide financial assistance post-2014 – the amount of which has not yet been revealed. Moreover, the nature of

American military operations in the country after 2014 was kept out of the ambit of the SPA, the negotiations which are to commence at a later stage.

The US considers it crucial to maintain a residual force in the country in order to prevent Afghanistan from once again becoming a safe haven and operating base for al Qaeda and other terrorist organizations, and to maintain an American operating base in the region to expand their influence in Central Asia and counterbalance that of Russia and China. However, the process of negotiation carried major drawbacks, which is likely to undermine the nature of American presence in the long-run, and America's long-term involvement in Afghanistan could be far from being conducive for stability.

It is the importance of this pact for the US and for them to maintain some military presence in Afghanistan post-2014, which becomes an obstacle in itself as it gives the Karzai administration equity at the negotiation table. Having been gradually marginalized by the Americans, who took unilateral steps to engage the Taliban, Hamid Karzai is keen to exploit his enhanced position during negotiations to regain his stature. The recent spurt of anti-Americanism in Afghanistan will definitely work in Karzai's favour, and give him added leverage vis-à-vis the US.

The tilt in the balance between the two is already reflected in the US concessions to Afghanistan on two critical fronts, which paved the way for the SPA to be finalised. First, the US has agreed to transfer the control of the Bagram prison to the Afghan army at a much earlier date than they would have ideally preferred. Second, the conduct of and approval for the highly contentious night raids would also now be under the control of the Afghan forces, with the US forces being called upon only if required. While, this was heralded as a major breakthrough in the negotiations, it is possible that the US could be forced to grant further concessions that could undermine the effectiveness of their presence in the country post-2014.

Moreover, both the concessions, mentioned above, are likely to undermine the counterinsurgency operations. There are doubts about the capability of the Afghan forces to manage the detainees as their failures in the past have led to the premature release of detained

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militants, who have rejoined the movement. Similarly, the effectiveness of the night raids – considered to be an effective counterinsurgency tool by the US – now depends entirely on the Afghan Special Operations Unit, which may not be ready to undertake the task by themselves and on the prior approval of an all-Afghan panel that is likely to be more susceptible to the unpopularity of such raids among the Afghan population.

Irrespective of the effectiveness of the long-term presence of the US, its mere presence is likely to cause damage as well. First, it could jeopardize the US efforts to reach a settlement with the Taliban, whose decision of suspending peace talks is not permanent as of now. The Taliban demands a complete withdrawal of foreign military presence from the country, a demand that is completely contradictory to the desired aim of the SPA and the US. This puts the additional burden on the US to work out their long-term engagement in Afghanistan in such a way that they can preserve their security interests without forcing the Taliban into permanently ending hopes of some negotiated peace. It, however, seems unlikely that the two strands could be merged together.

Second, the concerns of the regional actors, particularly Iran, can also have a destructive impact. Tehran considers the American presence in Afghanistan a major security threat. This perception is likely to increase now that the US is going to stay on in Afghanistan post-2014. Iran has already denounced the pact and reports have emerged of the relations between Iran and the Afghan government being already strained. Moreover, the measured support provided by Iran to the Taliban at present to thwart the American war effort—in addition to its other covert destabilizing activities—could now be scaled up.

III TALKING TO THE TALIBAN

Despite the reservations of Hamid Karzai, it was accepted that the US can play an instrumental role in not only bringing the insurgents to the table, but also striking a deal with them. However, recent incidents – the Kandahar massacre, the Quran burning and the video of US soldiers urinating on the bodies of dead Afghans – has seen a spike in anti-Americanism in Afghanistan. The decision of Mullah Omar's Quetta Shura to suspend peace talks should be seen in light of such incidents. The changed scenario makes it tougher for peace talks to resume and, if they do resume, to reach a settlement with the Taliban.

The vulnerability of the foreign soldiers in Afghanistan and government and military advisors currently stationed there has increased as a result of the recent events. There have been more attacks perpetrated by members of the Afghan National Security Forces on their foreign counterparts as well—a direct consequence of the anti-Americanism. Whether these are the result of Taliban infiltration or people acting on their accord, it does make it tougher for the United States to take on the Taliban militarily. This would make it tougher for the US to apply significant military pressure on the insurgents and improve its bargaining position – an important prerequisite to coerce the Taliban into accepting its demands.

However, it seems more unlikely now that the Taliban would even be willing to resume negotiations with the US. The present situation is likely to have strengthened the hardliners within the Quetta Shura, who have been ideologically opposed to holding talks with the Americans from the start. They have always alleged that the US systemically insults Islam and the Afghan people, and the recent events provide them enough fodder to drive home the point. Mullah Omar may be keen to avoid an internal struggle at this critical juncture, and give in to the hardliners.

It is not just the internal squabbling which should concern Mullah Omar. If that was the case, he would not have agreed to peace talks in the first place. His political calculations are guided by realism, as evident from his decision to negotiate

with the Americans, and it is this realism that would compel him to pay heed to the present climate in the country. All major political groups in Afghanistan are taking note of the prevailing sentiments in the country in order to win brownie points with the masses. President Hamid Karzai has stood his ground during negotiations over the SPA under the pretext of preventing further erosion of Afghan sovereignty. Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's faction, the Hizb-e-Islami, a key opponent of Mullah Omar's, called off peace talks as well. If the Taliban were the only ones to resume negotiations, it could further erode their legitimacy.

The concessions, discussed above, made by the US on counterinsurgency tactics are also likely to discourage the Taliban from resuming talks. As the concessions and the watered down SPA is likely to reduce the effectiveness of the long-term presence of the US, the Taliban may decide that all they have to do is wait for the bulk of the remaining NATO troops to withdraw in 2014 to reclaim the initiative.

IV CONCLUSION

The continued engagement of the international community is a must in order to prevent the complete negation of the achievements of the past decade. However, the rising unpopularity of the war in the West and the rising unpopularity of the US in Afghanistan and the region are already creating roadblocks for such engagement. The existing currents and counter-currents, both in the West and in Afghanistan are going to make it tougher for the coalition partners and, especially the US to increase the magnitude of their support and involvement in the country.

The reduction of aid for development and security, anti-Americanism and the failure to reach a settlement with the Taliban, and significant concessions on counterinsurgency operations are limitations to the prolonged engagement of the west in Afghanistan that could possibly intensify the conflict as well.