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Rescuing Afghanistan: Let the Region Take Charge

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Abstract

The international community is set to meet again in London on 28 January 2010 to devise a new plan for the economic recovery and development of Afghanistan. The outcomes of the meeting will be analysed in a later brief by ISAS. This paper discusses how the continuing conflict in Afghanistan should be viewed and what countries with large Muslim populations in the Middle East and South Asia can do to save Afghanistan from edging closer to becoming a totally failed state. It is wrong and misleading to see the Afghan conflict in terms of a clash between two ideologies à la Huntington. It should be viewed instead as a case of relative deprivation of people who were once economically and politically powerful in the country. If the conflict has strong economic undercurrents then why seek a solution by suggesting that countries with large Muslim populations should step forward and save Afghanistan from totally collapsing? The reason for that presumably is the way the narrative of the conflict has been allowed to be shaped; it is being written in religious terms. Therefore a credible alternative may come from countries that can speak on behalf of the religion whose flag has been raised by the insurgents that seem to be winning at this time. The use of the term “countries with large Muslim population” is ostensibly for including India as well. It is critical to finding a lasting solution to a conflict that has gone on for more than three decades.

Introduction

The donor community is set to meet again on 28 January 2010 to devise yet another plan for Afghanistan. This would be third time that a large number of countries wishing to help Afghanistan will get together to do some tangible good for the country. The previous plans fell way short of everybody’s expectations. The London plan would be drawn up following the articulation of the American Afghan strategy by President Barack Obama on 1 December 2009. Delivered before an audience made up of the cadets attending the West Point Military Academy, the Obama plan had a strong military component. Its main thrust was to wrest from the Taliban the control of the main population centres or, if these were still with the Kabul government, stop the insurgents from gaining control of them. Once these places were secure, the government, aided by the donors, was to pour a great deal of money into developing them so that there would be a palpable improvement in the economic and social

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situation of the citizens living there. After that happened – after the people had developed the confidence that they were being well served by the government – the citizenry of the area could be weaned away from the Taliban. This is the theory that is being worked upon.

The basic assumption behind this approach is correct – that the people have been driven towards the Taliban by economic desperation not by ideological convictions. That said, the strategy was undercut by its second component – that the Americans will begin to pull out their troops by July 2011. The London conference has been summoned to indicate that, notwithstanding the undertaking that the troop surge ordered by the American president will be in place for only 18 months, there is a long-term commitment by the international community to help in the economic and social development of Afghanistan.

Will this strategy work? This paper argues that there is a fatal flaw in this approach since it will not appear credible to the people at whom it is aimed. A different approach is required with a different group of countries supporting it.

It is all about economics

The United States decision to bolster its already large force in Afghanistan by sending in another 30,000 soldiers would only bring peace to that unfortunate country if its people perceive that the action is in their long-term interest. The struggle for Afghanistan has brought to the fore two conflicting points of view. Some Afghans have come to the conclusion (most of these live in the areas in the country's south and east borders on Pakistan) that they will secure a better future for themselves and the generations to come if they place their faith and trust in a government in Kabul that governs in the peoples' interest rather than in the interest of those who make up the governing elite. It is not entirely clear whether these people, a large number of whom support the Taliban, are wedded to political and economic systems inspired by Islam. They do not have good memories of the type of governance the Taliban brought in the late 1990s but they have an even poorer view of the damage inflicted by the current regime operating out of Kabul.

There is a consensus among Afghan watchers that Kabul under President Hamid Karzai has not delivered in the areas in which the Pushtuns are in large majorities. This ethnic group has been left behind by other Afghan communities. The income gap between the Pushtuns, who constitute more than 40 per cent of the country's population, and other communities has widened to the point where the average income per head of the Pushtun population is possibly half of that of the latter. Some 50 per cent of the work force in the Pushtun regions is unemployed. What is sustaining the economy from total collapse is the large amount of remittances from the people who belong to the area but have gone to the Middle East in search for work. But that poses a real problem since, it is believed, that remittances also finance some of the insurgent activity. Drug trade is the other source of income for the people, but the bulk of the return from this activity goes to the warlords, some of whom are heavily involved in this business.

There is also the impression that the political system put in place after the overthrow of the Taliban in 2001 will not countenance a regime change. That this is indeed the case was demonstrated by the way the presidential elections were handled last year.² Had they not been

² See Shahid Javed Burki, a) "Afghan Presidential Election: Developments Since the Fall of the Taliban", ISAS Brief No. 123, 17 August 2009; b) "Afghanistan Elections 2009: The Day of Reckoning", ISAS Brief No. 126, 31 August 2009; c) "Afghanistan Presidential Election 2009: Inconclusive Results a Dilemma for

so obviously rigged by the regime in power in its own favour, Kabul would have seen a new set of rulers. This experience seems to suggest that force through insurgency was the only way to bring a new group to power in Kabul, even if that group was drawn from the Taliban who were thoroughly discredited during their first time in power. That there was not much love for the Taliban became clear the way the victors were received in Kabul. As the Taliban fled, those who took their place were received with warmth and expectation. For a few years there was considerable goodwill towards the regime headed by President Hamid Karzai. And then things began to go wrong. America diverted its attention towards Iraq and Karzai allowed a number of local warlords to reclaim for themselves and their associates the land they had lost to the Taliban. These local leaders also usurped for their own use copious amounts of external funds received from the donor community. In 2009, Transparency International, the Berlin-based non-government organisation that keeps track of corruption trends in the world, rated Afghanistan as one of the two countries with the most corrupt governments on earth. The other was Somalia.

Afghanistan, India and Pakistan

Instead of relying on the largesse of the West, the part of the globe that has not endeared itself to the Muslim world, it might be appropriate to think in terms of the involvement of countries with large Muslim populations for saving Afghanistan from disaster. By emphasising the role of the “countries with large Muslim populations”, India is also being included among nations that will be asked to provide assistance in the effort. India’s inclusion is critical since its participation will prevent Afghanistan from becoming another Kashmir, a contested area for domination by India and Pakistan. Some of the difficulties Afghanistan currently faces can be attributed to the rivalry between these two South Asian nations. Pakistan has been nervous about the growing influence of New Delhi on Kabul. The fact that India has provided a US\$1.4 billion line of credit to the Afghan government has not gone unnoticed in Islamabad. Some of this money is being used to construct roads in the country which has gone through several decades of infrastructural degradation as a result of the long-enduring conflict. India is also committing resources to the construction of some visible symbols of its close relationship with the country. A significant amount of Indian assistance is being spent on building a new parliament house in the capital. Islamabad has always looked at Kabul’s relations with New Delhi as a zero-sum play; if India gains, Pakistan loses. This is, of course, incorrect since both countries will lose if they continue to treat Afghanistan the way they have done in the past.

Pakistan’s economic relations with Afghanistan have at best been uneasy. Kabul depends on its neighbour to the south for the transit of most of its international trade. Pakistan is obliged under its international obligations concerning the rights of landlocked countries to provide transit facilities. This was done most of the time, although at times, Pakistan has blocked the passage of some goods on the ground that they were not destined for the Afghan market but were meant to be smuggled back into Pakistan. Such smuggling did take place and represented a significant loss of revenue for Islamabad when the tariffs on international trade were high. A small town near Peshawar called Bara flourished since it offered Pakistanis goods that were not available in the local markets. With the lowering of import duties, this kind of smuggling is less consequential for Pakistan. It does not suffer the kind of revenue leakages that were happening when tariffs were high.

the United States”, ISAS Brief No. 130, 22 September 2009; d) “Afghanistan Presidential Elections 2009: The Run-up to the Run-off”, ISAS Brief No. 134, 26 October 2009; and e) “Hamid Karzai’s Second Term as Afghanistan’s President: Promises, Challenges and Prospects”, ISAS Brief No. 141, 24 November 2009.

For the Afghans what matters most is the grant of transit rights to India for two-way trade between the two countries. This is not acceptable to Pakistan as long as its relations with India remain problematic. The author of this paper had raised the issue of the grant of transit rights to India for trade with Afghanistan and Central Asia with two recent presidents of Pakistan, Pervez Musharraf and Asif Ali Zardari. Both realised the enormous benefits of granting transit rights. However, both were also of the view that this issue will have to be part of a comprehensive settlement of outstanding issues with India. This is short-sightedness on the part of Islamabad since it stands to gain much more than India in economic terms if it allows its neighbours goods and commodities to flow through its territory to Afghanistan and beyond.

A Regional Solution to the Afghan Problem

Extremists in the Muslim world have begun to attract recruits from places other than Afghanistan and Pakistan. This should be of considerable concern for the people and leaderships of the countries in the region. There is a growing presence of *Al-Qaeda* in Yemen and Somalia, two countries that have weak governments and weak economies. It is this type of environment that provides rich and fertile ground for groups such as *Al-Qaeda* to throw their roots in. To prevent this scourge from spreading, it is time for countries that have the military and financial resources to come together and devise a large development plan – a sort of Marshall Plan³ for Afghanistan – to assist Kabul in defeating the insurgents. This should be done by a combination of economic and social development along with the show and use of force by nations whose presence on the ground may be less troubling for the traditionally xenophobic Afghan people. A contingent of Muslim troops may be more acceptable to the local population than a force drawn entirely from the United States and Europe.

This effort will need a leader and Egypt with some experience of helping with conflict resolution in the Middle East can play that role. It will need money – lots of it – and the Organisation of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) with their coffers full, should be able to fund a Marshall Plan type of activity. Including India into the group of sponsors is critical for a number of reasons. This kind of arrangement will have for the first time India and Pakistan on the same side of conflict. Working together, they will be able to see the advantages that can be gained from cooperation rather than by perpetuating decades old hostility. With a very large Muslim population – the third largest in the world following Indonesia and Pakistan – India will be able to play a role for which they are well equipped. It has been India's wish – thwarted by Pakistan – to join the Organization for Islamic Countries. Participating in this activity will fulfil that ambition as well.

Conclusion

The main point advanced in this paper is that some fundamental departures need to be made in the way the international community, led by the United States, has dealt with the Afghan problem. After months of deep reflection, President Obama and his administration have come up with a strategy which is close to the one that was followed by President George W. Bush in the closing days of his administration. But Afghanistan is very different from Iraq, less

³ The Marshall Plan, christened after the then-United States (US) Secretary of State Mr George Marshall, was a reconstruction program implemented by the US during 1948-1952 for the countries of Western Europe.

well developed, more suspicious about outsiders, and concerned about preserving its culture which fuses tribal and religious traditions. Those entrusted with the job of bringing the country out of the mess in which it finds itself today are those who have greater affinity with the local people. This suggests putting together a Muslim force drawn from the region with a well articulated program of social and economic development financed by petrodollars.

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