

Post-2014 Afghanistan and India's Options

Arvind Gupta, Ashok Behuria, Vishal Chandra and Smruti Pattanaik

Dr Arvind Gupta is Director General, Dr Ashok Behuria & Dr Smruti S Pattanaik are Research Fellow & Mr Vishal Chandra is Associate Fellow at the Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (IDSA), New Delhi.

July 18, 2012

Summary

As the date of withdrawal of the international forces draws nearer, Afghan watchers are postulating several scenarios about the future of the country. While some are optimistic that the process of transition will continue despite the challenges, most say that the existing state structures are too vulnerable to withstand the shocks of withdrawal. Moreover, there are issues relating to inter-ethnic disharmony, pervasive culture of militancy, radicalisation, warlordism, rampant corruption, narcotic trafficking, growing public apathy, all of which could make matters worse. In such a scenario, India, with its last one decade of constructive engagement in Afghanistan, has much at stake. The prospect of Afghanistan ruled by a regressive regime that is moreover amenable to Pakistan's strategy of expanding its strategic depth and denying any space to India, poses a challenge to India's continued efforts to bring development and prosperity to the Afghan people and strengthen the foundation of a democratic and liberal Afghanistan. In this context, this policy brief looks at the future of Afghanistan and suggests policy alternatives for India as Afghanistan gears up for the withdrawal of foreign forces by the end of 2014.

The Afghan situation is unfolding rapidly. At the internal level, there is a clear lack of consensus on how to take the process of democracy forward. At the international level, there is a sense of fatigue, despite ongoing efforts to muster up financial support for sustaining the process of stabilisation of the Afghan state. From the Bonn Conference in December 2011 till the Tokyo conference of July 2012, international meetings have been “an awkward mixture of hope, fantasy, and failure”, according to an American observer. At Tokyo, the international community did make a pledge of \$16 billion for the next four years, which is much less than what the Afghan President had quoted at Bonn (\$10 billion per year) and short of what the Afghan Central Bank estimated (\$6-7 billion per year) as necessary for sustaining economic growth. The adverse effects of decreasing international aid on critical areas – related to building democratic institutions, ensuring gender equality and strengthening of the media – have already decelerated the process of stabilisation in Afghanistan.

Moreover, the reconciliation efforts do not seem to be succeeding. There is no regional consensus on how to approach the post-withdrawal situation. Pakistan is looking for strategic depth; Iran wants to see the back of American forces from Afghan soil; China eyes Afghan resources without any definite commitment to invest in Afghan security and stability; Russia is ready to engage as a service provider if the funds can be arranged elsewhere. All in all, there is not enough international support for keeping the ‘new Afghanistan’ afloat. Therefore, the obvious alternative scenario is staring us in the face – incessant turmoil, political instability and possible civil war leading to chaos and disorder. Against this backdrop, it is necessary to take stock of the evolving situation in Afghanistan and suggest policy options for India in the changing context.

Post 2014 Afghanistan: How Things May Evolve

Most foreign troops are scheduled to leave by 2014, although some will remain. They will be either in non-combat roles or at best in special action roles. The primary responsibility for security across the country will be that of the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF).

The key question is: **Will the Afghan forces be able to discharge their responsibility effectively?** In similar circumstances, earlier in the 1990s, Najibullah’s forces lasted for a few years but eventually fell. However, Najibullah was isolated and did not have any external support. This time around the situation is different. The international community is prepared to help the Afghan forces by providing money, equipment and training. But it is not known whether this help will be sustained over a longer period of time, say 10 years, or the Western interest will dry up after a point. The Afghan forces have a better chance of resisting a Taliban takeover for a longer time than Najibullah’s forces. That is a positive sign. The most optimistic scenario of a stable Afghanistan democratising further and moving away from Talibanisation depends squarely on the capacity of the ANSF to provide security to the nascent constitutional government in Kabul.

There is also a **possibility of the ANSF disintegrating along ethnic lines**, in case the Taliban, a predominantly Pashtun-majority entity, successfully overruns Kabul after 2014. In view of the desertions from ANSF at the moment and incidents of ANSF recruits targeting their Western trainers, questions are also being raised about their motivation and interest to take on the Taliban in the post-withdrawal situation. Many may also melt into the Taliban ranks. However, in case of such an eventuality, the non-Pashtun forces are likely to resist the Taliban onslaught. Since the Taliban are used as instruments of Pakistan's Afghan policy, and the return of Taliban to power may not be in Indian interests, India may have to look for the right options to leverage its position in Afghanistan and join efforts at all levels to prevent the possibility of Afghanistan emerging again as a hub of jihadi terror.

However, even if the ANSF were to stay together and puts up a brave front against the Taliban, buttressed by international efforts, **the key challenge will still remain the Taliban safe havens in Pakistan**. The Afghan forces and the government will remain seriously handicapped if Pakistan does not take decisive action against the Taliban—the Quetta Shura and the Haqqani group—and myriad other groups seeking to take over Kabul by force. Pakistan continues to be in denial mode despite proof of its provision of moral and material support to these forces. Pakistan continues to have a deep relationship with the Taliban and retains its leverages with them to use them as instruments against India; however its control over them is at best tenuous.

The Taliban are so far maintaining a facade of unity; however, there are several factions working at the ground level. The Haqqani faction seems to be divided too and the younger lot in the faction are averse to the idea of reconciliation. Some of them continue to have deep sympathies for, and might be working with, the al Qaeda. The Haqqanis are apparently opposed to the growing hold of the Hizb-e-Islami in President Karzai's administration. The Quetta Shura is busy retaining its grip over diverse sections claiming their affiliation to the Taliban. There are many in the Taliban ranks who do not want reconciliation and are contemplating an armed takeover soon after troops withdrawal. Which vector will finally drive the Taliban policies remains to be seen. The possibility of different pro-Taliban factions confronting each other and also taking on Hizb-e-Islami, and Afghanistan relapsing into a long drawn-out civil war, cannot be ruled out.

The nature of domestic instability in Afghanistan will determine whether post-withdrawal the Afghan forces will be able to meet the challenges effectively. It is still uncertain as to who will succeed President Karzai. There is speculation that Karzai may not leave at all, and may manipulate his continuation by some means. The fact remains that Karzai's popularity has ebbed and he has many political adversaries. His relationship with the Western Governments is strained. The Western governments criticise him for nepotism, corruption, etc. One can expect political instability and jockeying for power in Afghanistan during 2013-2014. This may weaken the capacity of the government and exacerbate the security situation.

At present **there are four different coalitions competing for influence and power** in Afghanistan today. They are:

- (i) *The Ruling Coalition*: (President Karzai, Hizb-e-Islami factions, Marshal Faheem, Karim Khalili, etc.)
- (ii) *Change and Hope Coalition* (Dr. Abdullah, Yonus Qanooni, Ahmad Behzad, Nur Muhammad Atta, etc.)
- (iii) *National Front Coalition* (Dostum, Ahmad Zia Massoud, Mohaqiq, Amrullah Saleh, etc.)
- (iv) *Haq and Adalat* (Truth and Justice) Coalition (Hanif Atmar, Azita Rahfat, etc.)

The two coalitions led by non-Pashtuns (Change and Hope & National Front) may come together to fight the others in the next elections. These two want a decentralised system in Kabul while the other two coalitions want a unitary, centralised state apparatus.

The **broad realignment of political forces** suggests that a **Pashtun-non-Pashtun political divide may lead to ethnic polarisation** and political instability, in case of integration of the Taliban into the Pashtun-heavy central government in Kabul. Already, there is a feeling among the Tajiks, Uzbeks and the Hazaras that Karzai has given a free rein to Pashtun nationalists who are impervious to the sensitivities of other ethnic groups.

Reconciliation with the Taliban is acceptable to the international community; but the process is turning out to be messy. The Taliban feel triumphant and are not in a mood to reconcile on the terms outlined by the Karzai government – adherence to the Constitution and renunciation of violence. The US and Pakistan have their own agendas, of which the Afghan government is apprehensive and wary. Talks between the US and the Taliban have not succeeded because the US does not want to release some of the Taliban leaders as per their initial demands. For its part, Pakistan wants to direct the course of negotiations through the Taliban representatives loyal to it. The process of reintegration which would have created the basis for wider reconciliation has petered out because of the lack of a clearly outlined plan of action and institutional support. The High Peace Council is ineffective and ongoing mediation by countries like Turkey and Germany has not made much progress.

The drugs issue remains unresolved. According to most estimates, the efforts to curtail the production of drugs and curb narco-trafficking have failed. Huge vested interests have developed in Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Russia to facilitate drug trafficking from Afghanistan. Drugs will tear into the social, economic and political fabric of Afghanistan. Since the Taliban are dependent on drugs money at the moment, they are unlikely to accept any international efforts to stop drugs production in the short term.

There is a **sense of fatigue among the wider population in the Pashtun majority areas in the south** regarding the chronic state of uncertainty in Afghanistan. Nevertheless, the Taliban continue to recruit from among the younger population in these areas, even if their popular base seems to be shrinking. This may be more due to lack of employment opportunities than because of ideological leanings. In certain places, like in Ghazni, local youth have gone to the extent of resisting the Taliban diktats to boycott schools and colleges. The vision of a new Afghanistan seems to be motivating people in the urban areas and this is slowly percolating to the peripheries as well.

In the post-2014 scenario, **the role of regional countries** will increase. The SCO, which has been on the sidelines until now, is gearing up to assume a bigger role in Afghanistan, thanks to new-found interest being shown by China. Afghanistan has been admitted to the SCO as an observer member. China has signed a partnership agreement with Afghanistan and hopes to continue with its policy of resource mobilisation through investment in mining and communications. But the issue of security remains the paramount question. The SCO countries do not have the money to spend in Afghanistan but they can offer support for capacity-building.

There is a good chance that **Afghanistan will increasingly integrate with Central Asia** in the post-2014 phase. Afghanistan does have the potential to emerge as a transit hub between the Indian subcontinent and Central Asia. Apart from the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) gas pipeline, it can earn substantial revenue from overland trade. Given China's growing interest in building communication network in the region in general, and in Afghanistan in particular, as well as Pakistan's resistance to allow India transit through its territory, Afghanistan may become more integrated with Central Asia than South Asia.

There could be more **cooperation between the CSTO and NATO** in the post-2014 phase. The Russians and the Chinese both recognise that no matter how despicable the NATO presence may be, it does provide security to Afghanistan and should continue to do so in future. China has been depending heavily on the security offered by international forces for its investments in Afghanistan. Russia understands the adverse effects of a radical dispensation in Kabul and would support any future US-led efforts to provide security to a liberal and democratic government in Afghanistan. Thus, cooperation among rivals is a possibility.

Afghanistan has made some **impressive achievements which cannot be denied**. Girls are going to school, the security situation in northern and western parts is not bad and some developmental activity has taken place thanks to the aid and assistance from the international community. The Afghan security forces have also been able to put up a tough fight with the Taliban in several areas. If given solid and sustained support by the international community, they may be able to get the better of the Taliban. But the

government has several institutional weaknesses that need to be addressed. That is where India can come in.

Options for India

India, by adopting a **low-key role** in the last few years, has set itself apart as a country which is genuinely interested in reconstruction and development. India's small-budget interventions in Pashtun areas have been well-received/ appreciated by the population in areas infested by the militants, which has even forced the Taliban to grudgingly acknowledge India's constructive role. Thus, India does have the acceptability to play a key role in Afghanistan in the next few years. The partnership agreement between the two countries allows India to strengthen linkages in the security sector too. The common Afghan, irrespective of her/his ethnicity, is keen that India continues to play a bigger role in stabilising Afghanistan. In contrast, Pakistan has lost credibility among the Afghans, who consider it as a country which does not have anything positive to offer, and can only export terrorism and destabilise the situation further.

There is a pessimistic view in certain circles in India that India will find it difficult to stay engaged given Pakistan's continuing nexus with the Taliban and its resolve to disallow space for India in Afghanistan after 2014. **However, the situation in Afghanistan may not be all that bad at the moment.** It has to be remembered that:

- (a) Pakistan is fast losing popular goodwill in Afghanistan;
- (b) it may not be possible for the Taliban to take over Kabul so easily given that support from Pakistan will be hard to come by because of both the gaze of the international community on Afghanistan and increasing preoccupation with the internal security situation; and
- (c) there is a recognition in Afghanistan cutting across all ethnicities and groups that the war ravaged country would need continued assistance from all possible sources and, among the regional countries, it could bank on India as a reliable partner. Even the Taliban may not be too averse to receive continued Indian assistance. The perception that India is open to the idea of working with Pakistan in Afghanistan (even if it is impracticable) has enhanced India's image among ordinary Afghans.

Thus, if India retains the political will to remain engaged in Afghanistan, it can do so even as the latter becomes turbulent. India must be ready to provide the necessary resources to sustain its engagement. It needs to improve its delivery mechanisms and cut down on implementation delays. India must show greater receptivity to the needs of common Afghans and build contacts at multiple levels. India no longer has as much leverage with the erstwhile northern alliance members (Tajiks, Uzbeks and Hazaras) like it had a decade earlier. These links will have to be reactivated. India must reach out to all shades of Afghans.

The India-Afghanistan relationship must go beyond aid and build a comprehensive economic relationship. An FTA with Afghanistan can be considered here. The recent investment summit on Afghanistan is a good beginning that must be sustained. Afghanistan is in urgent need of measures to boost its revenue generating capacity. India can contribute in the field of revitalising agriculture, building infrastructure (railroads, highways, processing plants, etc.), which could spur long-term economic growth and create jobs, and building of institutions that will stabilise the process of democratisation.

But we cannot be wishful in our thinking. While Indian intervention in Afghanistan must be increased, this may not be easy. **If the security situation worsens, we may have to be selective in our programmes.** We must contribute to institution building. We should also have a regular political dialogue with the Afghan government to ensure that it adapts to the changing political scenario and adopts correct policies. India should take care that its role is not misconstrued as interference. We can increase the number of Indian developmental interventions in Afghanistan, offer more number of scholarships to Afghan students, relax visa procedures for Afghan businessmen, students and patients seeking medical attention in India, and encourage the private sector to invest in areas related to education, IT, healthcare systems, aviation, mining, media and communication.

India should also be part of multilateral efforts, particularly the SCO, CSTO, NATO etc. Since China is looking towards increasing its profile in Afghanistan, India should have a dialogue with China (and even with Iran and Russia) on the nature and scope of our future engagement with Afghanistan.

India must not get bogged down by Pakistan. India's policy in Afghanistan must be Afghan-centric and not be concerned about Pakistani efforts to gain strategic depth. In fact, by getting involved in Afghanistan, Pakistan is likely to endanger its own security and stability.