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Afghanistan: From the Military to the Political Solution

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Afghanistan is surfacing as one of the most important foreign policy challenges of the incoming Obama Administration. The Taliban insurgency encompasses the entire Pushtun nation that straddles the Pakistan-Afghanistan border. The recent appointment of two experienced US and British generals testifies to the importance both US and NATO attach to Afghanistan.

Rising Taliban Insurgency

The Taliban insurgency has increased in terms of the scale of violence. It has also given the insurgents control, both directly and indirectly, of a large swath of territory. According to a December 2008 report by the International Council on Security and Development (ICOS), the Taliban holds a permanent presence in 72 percent of Afghanistan, up from 54 percent in 2007. Furthermore, they maintain a threatening presence in areas just 40 km outside the capital Kabul, especially in the provinces of Logar, Wardak and Kapisa.

The problem assumes a dangerous dimension if the country holds the presidential election in May 2009, as constitutionally required. Since the entire Pushtun belt comprising the south, southeast and eastern provinces of Afghanistan is affected by the Taliban-led insurgency, it may not be easy to hold the presidential election in these areas. Also, the Pushtun population forms the mainstay of President Hamid Karzai's political power. Non-participation by Pushtuns in any electoral process in the country due to the worsening security situation in the Pushtun belt may prove to be a setback to his aspirations for reelection. It may also de-legitimize any future electoral processes in the war-ravaged country.

Having realized the futility of pursuing a purely military approach to the Afghan problem, the Afghan government as well as the international community is now making efforts to engage the Taliban to seek a long-lasting solution to the Afghan imbroglio. Peace efforts are being pursued on three levels - national, regional and international - to stabilize Afghanistan through reconciliation with insurgent groups.

National Level

The first serious effort to seek a political solution was initiated by President Karzai when Saudi Arabia sponsored four-day informal talks in Mecca in September 2008 between Afghan government officials and former members of the Taliban movement. However, the talks failed to yield any results. In fact the Taliban leader, Mullah Omar, in December 2008 refuted reports of holding any such talks and spelled the immediate withdrawal of US and NATO troops from Afghanistan as the sole condition that could lead to peace talks with the Karzai government.

It needs to be mentioned that the US, apart from stabilizing Afghanistan, seems to harbour long-term geopolitical objectives in Afghanistan which borders Central Asia, China, Pakistan and Iran, and which may require the sole superpower to maintain a long-term presence in the war-ravaged country. However, the Taliban insurgency is not a monolithic phenomenon and involves many stakeholders such as Hizb-e-Islami (Gulbadin) as well as foreign militants, such as Al Qaeda, who are closely connected to Maulana Jalaluddin Haqqani, the supreme commander of the Afghan Taliban, and the main backer of foreign militants in Pakistan's tribal areas. All these entities operate in specific provinces, and any effort to bring peace should involve their full participation and support.

Regional Cooperation

Parallel with national efforts to seek a political solution, both Pakistan and Afghanistan are attempting to find a political solution within the ambit of the Peace Jirga (Assembly of Tribal Elders) and its smaller version, the mini-Jirga, known as Jirgagai, which include Pushtun representatives from both sides of the Pakistan-Afghanistan border. A Jirgagai held in December 2008 in Kabul led to an agreement to set up a 10-member contact group of Pushtun leaders – both secular nationalists and religious scholars - from the two countries.

The contact group was tasked to establish contact with armed groups operating in both countries. While any such arrangement has the potential to create fear among the non-Pushtun population of Afghanistan, the inclusion of other ethnic groups in Afghanistan in the Jirga is a good starter, which could alleviate any misgivings that exist among the non-Pushtuns in Afghanistan.

While both Pakistan and Afghanistan are attempting to seek a long-lasting solution to the Taliban menace through political means, they have not foreclosed the possibility of a military course to force the Taliban into submission. Pakistan's present policy based on three Ds – Dialogue, Deterrence and Development – could be described as a “carrot and stick” policy. It attempts to promote economic development in the Pushtun lands as a dividend, and discourages militancy through military operations, thereby engaging the Taliban militants in a dialogue to address their grievances.

There is a simultaneous but incessant military operation codenamed “Sher Dil” by Pakistani security forces in four different parts of the tribal areas - Bajaur, Mohmand, Khyber and Swat district of North West Frontier Province. This is being matched by a similar US and NATO-led military operation code named “Lion Heart” on the Afghan side of the border. Such joint operations are proving to be detrimental to the Taliban as it degrades their resources and capabilities. Both countries are now also encouraging border tribes to raise anti-Taliban militias that would be funded by the US and NATO countries.

International Efforts

NATO has also expressed its approval to engage Taliban in peace talks. The French government organized two meetings in Paris in December 2008 and January 2009 respectively. The meetings brought India, Britain, Russia, Germany and Italy, the United Nations and the US together to encourage the states around Afghanistan, in particular Pakistan and Iran, to play a more positive role

in supporting Kabul's attempts to regain control.

Alongside this, Turkey is also spearheading efforts to increase trust between Pakistan and Afghanistan in an attempt to organize joint cooperation between the two countries to oust the Taliban-led militants on both sides of the Pakistan-Afghanistan border. Two such meetings have taken place in April and December 2008, in which the Turkish president, Abdullah Gul, held talks with both the Afghan and Pakistani leaders to solve their issues peacefully.

The war in Afghanistan would not be won merely on military might. Ultimately, what matters is who has greater staying power. Looking at the example of the former Soviet Union which finally withdrew in 1989 after unsuccessfully holding Afghanistan for nearly 10 years, it seems that the Taliban may emerge victorious in this war of nerves. However, the conflict has dragged Pakistan's Pushtun-inhabited northwest into this entire episode and is threatening both the short- and long-term stability of a nuclear Pakistan.

However, any political solution to the Afghan problem should be a comprehensive one. It should address Pakistan's larger concerns of an increasing presence of non-regional countries in Afghanistan, including India. The Indian Army Chief, Gen. Deepak Kapoor's statement on 14 February 2008 that the Indian military's presence in Afghanistan could give it some strategic depth against Pakistan in the wake of a conflict with the latter is causing serious concern in Pakistan. Such a solution will not alleviate Pakistan's nightmare of a containment policy being pursued by India in Afghanistan.

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