

ISAF, AFGHANISTAN AND PAKISTAN: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

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Abstract

Afghanistan, the crossroads of civilizations, has been at the centre stage of global power play for centuries. The Soviet invasion (1979-1989) and resultant US covert campaign against former Soviet Union has deeply influenced the social, political and economic sphere of Afghanistan and its neighbouring Pakistan. Soviet withdrawal in 1989, followed by US's hasty departure, encouraged factional fighting and civil war in Afghanistan. The situation paved the way for the religiously-motivated Taliban Government, which being ruthless in nature, neither succeeded in securing public acceptance at home, nor could win the recognition of international community. The US-led military operation in Afghanistan in the aftermath of 9/11 further destabilized the country. After eleven years of military campaigning, the US-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), could not subdue the Taliban in Afghanistan. Ironically, whilst today the international and domestic support for the US-led war on terror is waning, Taliban are growing stronger strategically and more influential politically, and posing a more formidable challenge to both the legitimacy of the Afghan administration and effectiveness of ISAF. Despite the drawdown plan of ISAF by 2014, a comprehensive political and military strategy for the Post-2014 Afghanistan has yet to be agreed upon. Envisioning a troubled future, US has engaged in covert negotiations with the Taliban either to have an honourable exit, or else for a peaceful co-existence. However, no major breakthrough could be attained yet, owing to deplorable demands on either side. The people of war-torn Afghanistan need stability and peace in their homeland. Attaining such, a situation would call for an indigenous Afghan-led peace process, taking on board all stakeholders in Afghanistan, supported by regional actors, NATO and United States. This paper aims at undertaking a detailed appraisal of Challenges and Opportunities for ISAF in Afghanistan from an academic approach.

Introduction

In the ultimate analysis, if people of Afghanistan and their coming generations view US and coalition as friends, war can be won. If they think otherwise it would be considered as lost.

(General Ashfaq Parvez Kayani)¹

During the joint news conference with President Hamid Karzai at White House, on January 11, 2013, President Obama announced pulling out of all US forces from Afghanistan by the end of 2014. President Obama said, “By the end of next year, 2014, the transition will be complete. Afghans will have full responsibility for their security, and this war will come to a responsible end.”² Indeed, 2014 represents a transition point not only for Afghanistan but also for the entire region. The strategic landscape of Afghanistan is witnessing a steady but profound shift, as the drawdown date of ISAF (i.e. 2014) is rapidly approaching. The political and strategic groundwork undertaken within this timeframe will largely determine the outcome for the future of Afghanistan. Despite differences, there remains established closeness between Pakistan and Afghanistan. Both share similar culture and society – same religion and norms. Thus, being a responsible neighbour, Pakistan will continue to monitor the developments in Afghanistan. It will also continue to play a constructive role to end the war in the interest of Afghanistan and for a long-term regional peace and stability.

Some key questions about the nature of post-2014 geopolitical order in Afghanistan need further probing. These include: What will be the future political setup in Afghanistan best suited to ensure stability in relations with all its neighbours? What will be the nature of ISAF and particularly US commitments to Afghanistan after 2014? Would there be a complete departure of ISAF or will US preserve PMBs (Permanent Military Bases) beyond 2014? Will Afghan security forces be able to take on the security responsibilities of the country after drawdown of ISAF? What role India foresees in the future Afghan setup? How will

the border security mechanisms between Pakistan and Afghanistan work; particularly under an environment of a greater mistrust and militants attack on Pakistani positions from Afghan soil?

A calibrated response to these questions will shape the nature of Pakistan's relations with Afghanistan, United States and ISAF. In the past, this relationship has been professed by a mirage of daunting and glaring issues between US and Pakistan – ranging from cooperation to a near hostility. The latest manifestation of this bumpy relationship has been the almost seven months blockade of NATO logistic supply lines, in the aftermath of the NATO attack on Pakistani military posts, killing 24 soldiers on 26 November 2011. This was indeed, the latest blatant violation of Pakistani sovereignty by ISAF, and happened while Pakistan is an ally and frontline partner of the US-led coalition in Afghanistan. Such like incidents clearly indicate that the relationship between Pakistan and US lacks a credible strategic foundation, thus, continues to largely remain transactional in nature.

Despite eleven years of deployment with absolute operational freedom, ISAF has not succeeded in creating conditions on the ground conducive for peace and stability in Afghanistan. Besides Afghanistan, Pakistan, its immediate neighbour, is facing the consequences of conflict that has steadily spilled over into its territory. Indeed, the progress of ISAF in Afghanistan with regard to security and development during the last one decade is being visualized as a source of pessimism. It has not improved from what it was envisaged by Professor Barnett R. Rubin, a US expert on Afghanistan, presently Director of Studies in the Centre on International Cooperation, New York University in 2009; as

“The situation in Afghanistan has turned so far against the United States, NATO, the international community, and those Afghans who originally hoped that the post-September 11 intervention would finally bring them a chance for normal lives.”³

ISAF: Achievements versus Mandate

The basic objective of establishing ISAF, set forth by Bonn Conference of 5 December 2001, formalized through United Nations Security Council Resolution 1386 of 20 December 2001, was to assist Afghan Government for the maintenance of security in Kabul and its surrounding areas, to create favourable atmosphere for the transitional Afghan Administration as well as the UN personnel.⁴ In this regard, it is pertinent to mention the UNSC Resolution (1386/2001) adopted in its 4443rd meeting; that

“Authorizes, as envisaged in Annex 1 to the Bonn Agreement, the establishment for 6 months of an International Security Assistance Force to assist the Afghan Interim Authority in the maintenance of security in Kabul and its surrounding areas, so that the Afghan Interim Authority as well as the personnel of the United Nations can operate in a secure environment.”⁵

Over the years, the role of ISAF extended throughout the country. Under Chapter VII of the UN Charter, ISAF was assigned peace enforcement mandate in Afghanistan. After taking over the command of ISAF in August 2003, NATO maintains significant troops' contributions in Afghanistan. Indeed, NATO is assisting Afghan Government in exercising and extending its authority and influence throughout, “paving the way for reconstruction and effective governance.”⁶

After initial success of ISAF against Taliban in 2001-02, the US diverted its efforts and resources towards the Iraq war. Resultantly, there remained a lull-period from 2002 to 2005, which gave Taliban a respite to reorganize their movement and regain the local support. ISAF and US could have used these years for winning the hearts and minds of the Afghan masses, who otherwise were frustrated during Taliban rule. This was not done and, unfortunately, ISAF and US are yet to succeed in engaging Afghan masses in economic activities through formulation of a long-term strategy. General Stanley McChrystal in his assessment

report also stressed for buying the loyalties of locals, rather use of military might.⁷ Since mid-2010, ISAF claims to have achieved considerable progress in Southern Afghanistan, with regard to bringing violence to a manageable level. Nevertheless, these gains proved fragile and reversible, as proved by a surge of violent attacks, and also recognized by the ISAF officials. In a statement, former British Ambassador to Afghanistan Sir Sherard Louis Cowper-Coles said that,

“The real danger that the fragile gains made in the country would quickly evaporate when British and American troops leave in 2014. What we are doing, essentially, is cultivating an allotment in a jungle, and the question is what happens when the gardeners leave?”⁸

According to US Council on Foreign Relations, US military also views its gains in Afghanistan as “fragile and reversible.”⁹ There is a consensus among the scholars of international relations that, for a durable and sustainable peace and stability in Afghanistan, Afghan conflict has to be brought to a responsible end through a political process. This political process needs to be all-inclusive and Afghan-led with assistance afforded by ISAF, particularly United States and relevant regional stakeholders. From the point of view of the classical realists and constructivists, all major stakeholders have yet to contribute for Afghan peace. A plausible and logical argument of this honest confession is that, none alone could bring peace and stability in that war-torn country after eleven years of sustained violence. Resultantly, the poor Afghans are spending their lives in the same impecunious condition with the same uncertainty and in dearth as it was during or prior to Taliban regime.

The writer and scholar Anthony H. Cordesman and Adam Mausner of Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) write in their joint publication entitled, ‘How the US Will Win or Lose the War’ that, “No strategy for Afghanistan can be successful unless it answers the most basic question of going to war: can we win?¹⁰ *The answer is yes, provided that victory is defined in realistic and practical terms.* With the appropriate US leadership, it is still possible to help build an Afghanistan that is stable and

secure enough to ensure that it cannot become a centre for international terrorism again, or a centre of Jihadist operations throughout the world, a threat shared by Pakistan and other nations in the region. This will not be an arrangement that ensures victory underscoring the level of development, mature democracy, and Western concepts of human rights in Afghanistan. It can, however, be a kind of victory that allows the Afghans to pursue their destiny in relative peace.

While General McCrystal lost his job for giving a realistic picture of his assessment of the situation in Afghanistan in 2009, his successor and the defamed former Director CIA Gen. David Petraeus too could not claim a victory despite heavy surge in US troops and Special Forces – up to 148,000 ISAF troops. Gen. Petraeus once questioned by Diane Sawyer, ABC World News' anchor, whether the US was winning in Afghanistan. He replied, "We're making progress."¹¹ He further said that, "We're really loathed to use this very loaded term of winning or losing."¹² The former US Secretary of Defence, Robert Gates, on a similar question replied,

"Modern wars rarely end in decisive victories and that they are usually concluded through negotiated settlements. We have not had a declared victory in a war, with the possible exception of the first Gulf War, since World War II. It is the phenomenon of modern conflict. The key is, are our interests protected? Is the security of the United States protected? Are the Americans safer at the end because of the sacrifice these soldiers have made? That's the real question."¹³

After this forthright assessment of US engagement in Afghanistan, the question arises, where does Afghanistan and poor Afghans stand in the US priorities? At the end of the day, US interests overrides Afghan interests. This appraisal further gives rise to questions like, does 'Operation Enduring Freedom' carry some meaning for the ultimate peace and stability in Afghanistan or was it only meant to ensure the long-term security and protection of United States regional interests – including deterring threats of potential terrorists hailing from this soil.

Dilemma and Challenges Facing ISAF

In many ways, ISAF presence in Afghanistan is a source of sustaining the conflict, yet at the same time, it is crucial for protecting a weak government in Kabul. This paradox is critical from Pakistan's perspective when it reviews its relationship with ISAF and its security role in Afghanistan. United States, a super power and the largest contributor of troops, holds the key of Afghan theatre. London-based International Council on Security and Development (ICOS), in its report notes that, "Insurgents are now avoiding fire fights and direct attacks on NATO-ISAF/Afghan positions, and are focusing on using roadside bombs and targeted killings instead."¹⁴

By virtue of its mandate, ISAF is responsible for the security of Afghanistan and, resultantly, Pakistan directly faces consequences of its actions there. Unfortunately, from 2010 to mid-2012, Pak-US relationship has been rocked by the elements of mutual mistrust and uncertainty. Academia and analysts in Pakistan consider under-mentioned factors as the benchmark with relation to the progress made by ISAF in Afghanistan in last 11 years. It is all the more important to understand the fact that these indicators cover broad spectrum of issues beyond tactical level discussion and directly affect Pakistan, both domestically and regionally.

Level of Violence in Afghanistan

Despite heavy military presence and military operations, there has been a gradual deterioration in the security situation in Afghanistan, compared to Kabul's pre-2005 situation. Some of the key areas, totalling over half the Afghanistan land mass, are still dominated by the Taliban and warlords. Surely, this does not mean a Taliban takeover of Afghanistan is imminent, but implies the fact that ISAF is not winning either. US Department of Defense in its 2010 semi-annual report to Congress titled "Progress towards security and stability in Afghanistan" painted a bleak picture of security situation in Afghanistan. The report

says, “Overall trend of violence throughout the country increased over the same period a year ago, much of this can be ascribed to increased International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) activity.... The Afghan insurgency has a robust means of sustaining its operations. Small arms weapons and ammunition are readily available throughout the region, in addition to sources of Improvised Explosive Devices (IED) and home-made explosive materials and technology.”¹⁵

US Department of Defense in its 2012 semi-annual report to Congress painted a cautiously optimistic picture of security situation in Afghanistan in these words,

*“The year 2011 saw the first year-over-year decline in nationwide enemy-initiated attacks in five years. These trends have continued in 2012. The performance of the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) and the close partnership between the ANSF and ISAF have been keys to this success... Despite these and other positive trends during the reporting period, the campaign also continued to face both long-term and acute challenges.... The insurgency remains a resilient and determined enemy and will likely attempt to regain lost ground and influence”*¹⁶

The spectacular attacks in Kabul on high value targets signify the fact that level of violence had not been contained to a low-scale and ISAF have not been able to create conditions on ground conducive for security in Afghanistan. The mounting civilian casualties within Afghanistan, partly due to infamous night raids by ISAF, remain one of the contributory factors that promote and add to the wave of violence in Afghanistan. Attacking peaceful ceremonies, resulting in killing of innocent civilians, women and children, disgracing the Afghan dead bodies through urination and desecration of Holy Quran¹⁷ are some of very provocative acts, undertaken by the personnel of ISAF and such acts catalyze the growing wave of violence in Afghanistan.

Political Process in Afghanistan

The increase in insurgent violence in Afghanistan can partly be attributed to failure of US in bringing the Taliban and other insurgent leaders to the negotiating table. In Bonn Conference on Afghanistan in December 2001, Taliban and Pashtun representatives were left out, whereas, small groups were made part of the conference and later in interim Afghan government. Out of total expenditures of \$550 billion in Afghanistan by ISAF and US, only \$89 billion were spent for Afghan rebuilding, with bulk spent on ANA/ANP.¹⁸

Qatar peace process and other negotiations between Taliban and US, initiated some time back, did not make headway. Both parties are blaming each other for being inflexible in their demands. Analysts view that the peace process has little prospects of success unless there is a degree of trust and confidence amongst the Taliban that US will deliver on its promises and commitments. Another drawback with these negotiations was that, only selected individuals and less important/isolated groups of Taliban or Haqqani Group were chosen for dialogue. President Obama and President Karzai have agreed on 11 January 2013 to continue facilitating the Qatar chapter of Taliban office for a purposeful dialogue in future.

So far, ISAF and US have not made any meaningful offers to persuade Taliban and other groups to come to the negotiations table. Taliban and other opposition groups are not ready to accept the Afghan Constitution, as it is against the basic Afghan tribal structure. Furthermore, Taliban are not ready to accept US demand of laying down arms as a precondition for negotiation. Taliban fear that the aim of negotiations is just to break the momentum of their movement, otherwise, the ultimate aim of US remains to defeat them with force.

Challenges to Afghan Security Forces

Establishment of a professional and capable Afghan national security forces before ISAF leaves remains a crucial step. This is essential, as ANSF

has taken over control of maximum areas of Afghanistan from ISAF. Though the process of delegation of security responsibilities to ANSF by ISAF is still continuing, yet there are apprehensions about the capabilities of the former to take on these responsibilities. In September 2012, ISAF handed over 282 bases to ANSF and closed around 202 bases and posts as part of its drawdown plan.¹⁹ Since then the handing-over process of remaining 400 military posts and bases is going on. US is renovating even some strategically located bases and likely to hold those till its final departure or may like to convert those as PMBs. Nevertheless, Brig Gen Steven Shapiro said in a statement that, “As our Afghan security force partners take more responsibility for their own security, more bases will be closing and transitioning.”²⁰ He further said that, “Our footprint here will continue to shrink.”²¹

In the preceding years, the desertion rate of ANA remains high, while green on blue attacks are on the rise, forcing ISAF to halt the training process in some areas. Security of those districts transferred to ANA is posing new challenges. To be effective, ISAF needs to continue training of ANSF until it attains excellence. ISAF needs to work closely with ANSF for creating an ethnic balance among all positions of ANSF. There is an immediate need to halt infiltration of Taliban among the ranks of ANSF, a new emergent challenge. Besides, there is a very high rate of attrition (2% per month — 7,5000 per year) and huge dropouts of about 30-40 per cent from training centres and academies. To make up for this loss, new recruitment drive is undertaken repeatedly.

Erecting a Parallel Force Mechanism

Over the years, ISAF has established a parallel force mechanism in the form of new militias, local armed groups, like Afghan Local Police (ALP), Special Police, village protection teams, and other mushroom organizations, to control Taliban insurgency. For an example, for 68 districts of Afghanistan, 16,000 ALP personnel have been deployed with latest weapons and equipment. The process may provide temporary relief to ISAF, but in the long-term it will be difficult to manage, especially

after the drawdown of ISAF. Thus, ALP may become a nuisance for their opponents in a future scenario. Killing ISAF troops in Kandahar by ALP chief in August 2012 is a case in point. Coupled with this, green over blue incidents account for 14% of coalition casualties in 2012 only.²²

Increase in the Poppy Cultivation

Although poppy is cultivated in Afghanistan since centuries, yet there has been unprecedented increase in its cultivation in the country from 2002 to 2012. The opium and other drugs are then smuggled all over the world, especially, Europe and Russia. Each year Europe receives over \$65 billion opium from Afghanistan and 30,000 Russians are becoming drug addicts because of this trend.²³ According to UN drug control agency, the opium produced in Afghanistan is equal to 9 per cent²⁴ of Afghanistan's entire economy. Irrespective of its beneficiaries, ISAF has not been able to control its cultivation, processing and its smuggling elsewhere, which is creating concern among global human right organizations.

The Element of Mistrust and Respecting Sovereignty

Immediately after the US led ISAF military operation in 2001-2, Pakistan established over 1,000 military check posts and deployed 150,000 troops along Pak-Afghan border to control the militants' flow on either side.²⁵ Despite severe economic losses and unprecedented human sufferings during the campaign against terror, Pakistan is still not trusted by ISAF and US and is repeatedly criticized for its lack of 'quantum of efforts' and is being pressed to 'do more'. A quick empirical overview would point to the fact that the number of Pakistani civilian casualties have exceeded 41,000 (deaths) besides martyrdom of over 5,000 personnel of security forces during last decade of war on terror.²⁶ As compared to these Pakistani casualties, ISAF casualties are 3,256 only.²⁷ Among coalition partners, US casualties are 2,175 until mid January 2013.²⁸

Economically, Pakistan has suffered losses of over \$68 billion,²⁹ besides indirect losses in shape of missed opportunities of Foreign Direct

Investment. Furthermore, incidents like Salala attack, killing 24 Pakistani soldiers, Abbottabad raid to kill Osama Bin Laden and CIA driven drone attacks significantly shapes Pakistan's perception about International Security Assistance Force and US. Such incidents violated the sovereignty of Pakistan and created misperceptions among the masses that perhaps peace and stability in the region is not the ultimate objective of US and the main driver of ISAF. To prevent such incidents in future, the already established mechanism of border security management between Pakistan and ISAF needs to be made effective, with reliable communication from both sides to prevent any misinterpretation of intent. With respect to its sovereignty, Pakistan has legitimate reservations about the role of ISAF, though there is a difference in the perceptions of Pakistan and US about this conflict.

Imperatives for Economic Development

International community, especially European Union, has been generous in giving the financial assistance for reconstruction of war-torn Afghanistan. A lot of foreign capital has flown into Afghanistan, but this inflow has only provided minimal contributions in the nation-building and economic-development process. With the exception of Northern and some Eastern parts, generally there has been a stalled economic development process in Afghanistan, mainly owing to uncertain and deteriorating security situation. Initially Pakistan appreciated a situation that ISAF would be able to contain violence and bring peace in Afghanistan, paving way for the regional economic development through the projects, like TAPI (Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India) gas pipeline. Nevertheless, so far TAPI remains a distant dream. Within Afghanistan, there exist limited opportunities for economic activities to provide for the jobless youth, a vital segment that tends to engage in militant activities because of economic deprivations.

Douglas A. Wissing, a distinguished US writer and journalist, revealed some not-widely-known facts about the US campaign in Afghanistan in his book, "Funding the Enemy: How US Taxpayers Bankroll the Taliban."

He wrote about misuse of American taxpayer's money and said, "With the vague intention of winning hearts and minds in Afghanistan, the US government has mismanaged billions of development and logistics dollars, bolstered the drug trade, and dumped untold millions into Taliban hands."³⁰ Billions of dollars have been given to Taliban so that they do not attack the US soldiers and target its military bases. This amount, if utilized appropriately, could have created significant economic opportunities that would have benefited the common Afghan, instead of a militant group, fighting ISAF and US.

Pak-Afghan Border Security: Cross Border Raids inside Pakistan

Issue of cross-border incursions and raids by militants inside Pakistan, both by Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and their Afghan allies, has been a point of concern for Pakistan. Then the security arrangements on Pakistan-Afghanistan border remain one of the most important and contested issues between Pakistan and ISAF. Following the Malakand, Swat and South Waziristan military operations against TTP in 2009-10, the top leadership of TTP, along with its several hundred members, fled Pakistan and found sanctuaries in adjoining provinces of Afghanistan, despite heavy deployment of ISAF in those areas. Now frequent raids are originating from these areas on Pakistani military posts and against civil population inside Pakistan. With still deployed in most of Afghan territory having operational command of Afghanistan, ISAF failed to address this issue to the satisfaction of Pakistan.

Growing perception in Pakistan is that ISAF's inaction on these raids is its tacit approval, or else a quid pro quo by ISAF, that it would take action against these elements only if Pakistan responds by doing the same in North Waziristan. It is realized that efforts in resolving this problem through a strict border control mechanism would significantly boost Pakistan-ISAF relationship and truly transform the strategic landscape of the region in favour of the people of Pakistan and Afghanistan. The most effective and well-coordinated strategy could be that while Pakistan pounds militants from western flank, ISAF reciprocate Pakistani efforts by denying militants a free ride across border.

Deviation from Primary Objectives

The initial military objective of ISAF for Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) as outlined by President George W. Bush on 20 September 2001 and 7 October 2001 was: “destruction of terrorist training camps and infrastructure within Afghanistan, the capture of Al Qaeda leaders, and the cessation of terrorist activities in Afghanistan.”³¹ Besides, Gen James John claims that “the maximum estimate is less than 100 (Al Qaeda members) operating in (Afghanistan), no bases, no ability to launch attacks on us or our allies.”³² Since this claim was initially made in mid 2010, which implies that there would be further reduction in the number of Al Qaeda operatives by January 2013, thus minimizing threat for Al-Qaeda takeover. This also means that ISAF and particularly US may not be eyeing for a long-term stay in Afghanistan. However, there remains ambiguity about the future plans of US. United States and Afghanistan have agreed in the Strategic Partnership Agreement (SPA)-2012, on a long-term stay there. In one article, Alissa J. Rubin quotes an American official who confirms about SPA that, “This is the proof in the pudding that we intend to be there.”³³ Rubin clearly indicates that US plans to stay in Afghanistan for an indefinite period.

Besides, immediately after Lisbon Summit-2010, a senior official of the State Department said that, “The issue of changing combat missions is an independent national decision, which will be made by all 28 members of NATO. In the case of the United States, we simply have not taken that decision yet.”³⁴ He further said that President Obama has “not decided yet” to change to a non-combat mission in 2014. Nevertheless, President Obama himself said that, “Certainly our footprint will have been significantly reduced (by 2014). Beyond that, it is hard to anticipate exactly what will be necessary to keep the American people safe as of 2014. I’ll make that determination when I get there.”³⁵

Difference in Perception about the Conflict

The first and the foremost challenge is the difference in perception about the conflict. United States and ISAF perceive that the centre

of gravity of Afghan resistance lies in the tribal areas of Pakistan and believe that Pakistan provides support to insurgent forces attacking ISAF and Afghan forces. US have also been suspicious about the presence of Quetta Shura, a body of Taliban under Mullah Omar in Quetta, Pakistan. Pakistan rejects this presupposition and is of the view that it is actually the ungoverned space within Afghanistan, which acts as a source of logistical support for insurgency. Furthermore, Pakistan firmly believes that the centre of gravity of Afghan conflict remains inside Afghanistan.

This conflict in threat perception remains an obstacle for improving cooperation between Pakistan and ISAF. Linked with this misperception is another misconstrued idea of 'strategic depth'. Pakistani strategists believe that 'Strategic depth' does not imply controlling Afghanistan. "If Afghanistan is peaceful, stable and friendly we have our strategic depth because our western border is secured ... You're not looking both ways."³⁶ By this very concept, Pakistan does not pursue the policy of controlling Afghanistan. There appears to be diminution in misperception following the improvement in the bilateral relations between US and Pakistan, particularly after mid 2012, once Pakistan reopened NATO supply route through its soil. Pakistan is also facilitating US-Taliban negotiations and has released some of imprisoned Taliban leaders from its jails.³⁷

Lacking a Clear Strategy of Ending Afghan War

The second challenge to this cooperation is the lack of a clear strategy and objectives among the ISAF allies, and an ambiguous modus operandi of concluding this conflict. This creates varied perceptions within Pakistan about the motivations and long-term strategic goals of Western powers in the region. For example, on one side it is argued by most ISAF member-countries that they would be withdrawing from Afghanistan by 2014, while on the other end, one particular country has secured bilateral agreements with Kabul to stay beyond 2014. This lack of clarity and mixed signals approach creates doubts within Pakistan, and Islamabad fears that conflict will prolong in the region if complete withdrawal of ISAF forces does not take place. Furthermore, harmonizing the interests of Pakistan with that

of the extra-regional powers active in Afghanistan is pivotal, as Pakistan will remain a key player in new regional security architecture.

Until now, United States has not clearly defined its future strategy about its complete pull out or otherwise. Though President Obama announced complete drawdown by the end of 2014, yet this statement seems ambiguous, as he is asking immunity for his troops from Afghan Government after 2014. Regarding attainment of the objectives of war in Afghanistan, even President Obama is unclear. In response to a question about the cost of the war in terms of lives and money, President Obama said that

“We achieved our central goal ... or have come very close to achieving our central goal, which is to de-capacitate al Qaeda, to dismantle them, to make sure that they can't attack us again. Have we achieved everything that some might have imagined us achieving in the best of scenarios? Probably not. This is a human enterprise, and you fall short of the ideal.”³⁸

Beyond Reconstruction: Indian Role in Afghanistan

As an established US ally, Pakistan has made incomparable and enormous contributions towards international community. This is particularly true in the case of US during Cold War as well as in the ongoing War against terrorism. Now Pakistan feels that, US while disregarding its sacrifices, is promoting Indian role in Afghanistan, at the cost of Pakistani security concerns. Pakistan has its apprehensions about the future role of India in Afghanistan. It desires that Indian role should be restricted to reconstruction activities following a timeline. Moreover, training of ANSF and Afghan intelligence organizations and establishing consulates along Pak-Afghan border by India would further complicate threat matrix for Pakistan concerning its security along western borders. Indeed, there is a historical context to this rivalry between Pakistan and India over the unresolved issue of Jammu and Kashmir. Pakistan feel itself vulnerable from India along its eastern borders, opening another front along its western borders would be the worst security threat for Pakistan.

Pakistan always remained apprehensive about traditional Indian military threats on the issue of Kashmir along its eastern borders. Despite progress in the Indo-Pak peace process in the recent years, there remains tension between the two militaries during January 2013. Moreover, sporadic incidents by even non-state actors can cause misunderstanding among the rival states, as happened after Mumbai Attacks. President Obama himself declared Kashmir issue as the root cause of South Asian instability in 2008.³⁹ He stressed for its just solution, but unknown reasons barred him from undertaking any such step.⁴⁰ ISAF in general and United States in particular would have to take practical measures to arrest and address this Pakistani concern before final drawdown by 2014. Pakistan will not accept any force in Afghanistan that is hostile to its strategic and security interests and Islamabad will continue to exercise its influence to prevent the worst from taking place. Besides, Pakistan cannot accept India as a successor state to replace US in Afghanistan, owing to its security concerns.

Challenges Constraining Pakistani Limits of Engagement

There is a deep scepticism about public opinion related to US-led ISAF presence in Afghanistan. This uncertainty is further fuelled by continuous and unchecked drone attacks and violation of sovereignty of Pakistan. With these events as evidence and frequent accusations on various accounts by US, masses in Pakistan have strong reason to believe that Pakistani and international forces' interests are at odds in the region, which resultantly limits Pakistan's capacity to engage with ISAF.

Nevertheless, prospects of any meaningful cooperation between allies depend upon shared threat perception, commitments that are sustainable, clear strategy and expectations that can be met. This matrix of variables can be generally applied to test the strength of partnership and cooperation between allies. When this benchmark is applied to Pakistan-ISAF relationship, significant challenges come to the light as discussed above. Pakistan believes that in order to develop an equitable and acceptable framework for cooperation, these challenges must be resolved

on a priority basis as a confidence building measure. Keeping in view the 2014 timeline and shifting trends in regional strategic landscape, such a framework based on confidence-building measures between Pakistan and ISAF is essential to be formulated, for any substantive and timely progress in resolving the Afghan conflict.

The Way Forward: A Revised Context of Pak-ISAF Partnership

No country will benefit more from a secure and stable Afghanistan than Pakistan. Pakistan seeks peaceful relations with both its Eastern and Western neighbours based on sovereign equality, respect for mutual interests and dignity. It is, therefore, in the national interest of Pakistan that Afghanistan should be peaceful and stable. As highlighted above, there lie many complexities that Pakistan perceives as formidable obstacles to achieving peace in Afghanistan. Some of the steps are recommended below as a way forward for a stable and peaceful Afghanistan.

Constitutional Reforms in Line with Afghan Traditions: Historical, cultural, geographical and political discourse of Afghanistan's history suggests that there has never been a strong centralized federal government in Afghanistan, as the current constitution dictates. Rather, there has been an acceptable quasi-central government with strong tribal periphery. Connected to this reality is the fact that there are multiple power centres in Afghanistan's tribal society, which make it a difficult task to reconcile competing interests. How practical and sustainable is this idea of having a structure that constitutes a strong central government, as envisioned by US, remains a big question. To be acceptable by all Afghan factions, be it ethnic and/or religious diasporas, there is a need to reform the current constitution, accommodating the tribal needs of the country. ISAF and US need to extend full cooperation to incumbent Afghan Government in this regard.

Governance Reforms: One of the pertinent causes contributing to the sufferings of Afghan people is the abhorrent state of governance in Afghanistan. Corruption, nepotism, violation of merit and dishonesty

is the order of day in Afghanistan. Owing to these factors, caused by poor governance, there is a growing discontentment among the public. ISAF and United States need to enforce such reforms, which build up confidence of the people in the national governance system. Otherwise, a common Afghan is compelled to think that ISAF is deliberately supporting a corrupt governance system, to suit its stakes, instead of entertaining whims and desires of Afghans. ISAF has to take measures to arrest this rapidly growing perception.

Security Reforms: With respect to security, there also exists uncertainty among the people of Afghanistan. Where they feel sacred and terrorized from Taliban and other warlords, they do not feel protected from the ISAF either. If Taliban have been brutal towards Afghan people, ISAF also has bombed many innocents during night raids, marriage ceremonies and funeral processions. There is a growing need for ISAF to take measures that dilute the sense of insecurity prevailing among Afghan masses and actively attempt at replacing those sentiments with a sense of security for a common Afghan.

Synergy of Interests: International, Regional and Domestic: Looking towards post-2014 scenario, unless there is a synergy of interests at international, regional and domestic level, Afghan conflict will persist and its people will be the ultimate sufferers. Complete withdrawal of ISAF forces from Afghanistan is the only attractive option for domestic stakeholders in Afghanistan including Taliban. Such a strategy would have the acceptance of regional and global powers. However, ISAF has to bring peace and stability before its departure from Afghanistan, rather leaving the country with an uncertain future, leading to anarchy and civil war. This indeed is an exigent task, asking for a change of strategy; offensive to reconciliatory and political approach.

Reconciliation and Political Integration: As the focus in Afghanistan shifts from surge to transition, the important prerequisite for the success in the country lies in the formulation, implementation and pace of reconciliation process in place. Who are reconcilable elements?

Can there be a distinction between reconcilable and irreconcilable elements within Afghan resistance? What political compromises will be made between relevant stakeholders? These are some of the key questions that should be answered without ambiguity, as failure to do so will result in continuation of stalemate in Afghanistan and transition may not occur, which is a desirable end state.

The political integration process in Afghanistan has to be all inclusive and Afghan led with all the domestic power centres included in a grand bargain so that an end state i.e. transition takes place. In this context, Pakistan has always expressed its desire to help reach this end state through its historical, cultural and political relations with Afghanistan. Pakistan's Chief of the Army Staff, General Ashfaq Parvez Kayani outlined the broad contours of Pakistan's vision for a peaceful Afghanistan in a letter to US president Barack Obama in 2011, in which he stated:

“What is the way forward in Afghanistan? The end condition that we seek in Afghanistan is enduring peace based on stable environment. It is important to define peace and stability in Afghan context, which may well be less than perfect. Here stability is the key, which is essentially a function of balance. Balance in turn, is achieved by identifying and reconciling extremes. It implies that all the factions in Afghanistan should have a stake in peace process. Manoeuvring space is dependent on available time and resources. Time is short and resources limited. Idealism will have to operate within confines of hard ground realities. In the ultimate analysis, if people of Afghanistan and their coming generations view US and coalition as friends, war can be won. If they think otherwise it would be considered as lost.”⁴¹

Working out a Framework for Cooperation between Pakistan and ISAF: The framework of cooperation between Pakistan and ISAF should be based upon two pillars; First, the shared belief of a peaceful and stable Afghanistan through an all-inclusive approach; Secondly, basis of the cooperative framework should rest on sovereign equality, mutual respect

and a drive for sustainable peace. This framework will tantamount to a strategic overhauling of the entire Pak-ISAF relationship and absence of these pillars will only add to regional instability. This framework of cooperation should include components such as benchmarks, timelines, mutual discussions on strategic and tactical issues, clear responsibilities and roles, prioritizing issues and a feedback process.

Benchmarks should include setting realistic targets that are achievable in a constrained timeframe. Timelines would naturally include the transition timetable set at 2014. Mutual discussion on strategic and tactical issues will bring transparency into the framework while removing mutual suspicion and scepticism. Clear responsibilities should entail unambiguous role of stakeholders involved in conflict resolution. For example, Pakistan is the only country that can ensure peace within its own boundaries while ISAF is responsible for the security of Afghanistan. The feedback process should include the top political and military leadership of ISAF, Pakistan and Afghanistan to critically evaluate the progress on ground and pace of achieving agreed political objectives to end the conflict. The stability of this framework will stem from a shared belief in stability of Afghanistan.

Conclusion

Pakistan sees the region in transition as both an opportunity and a peril; in both short and long-term perspective. The outcome of this transition will largely depend upon the strategic decisions taken today in favour of peace and stability. Pakistan finds itself at the centre of debate and desires to build a region where regional interests converge and stability thrives, thereby creating a space for economic growth and prosperity long desired by the people of the region.

In this context, Pakistan sees its relationship with ISAF as critical for redrawing the contours of regional environment that is conducive for ending the longest conflict in recent history. Ultimately, it would be Pakistan's relationship with ISAF that would determine the trajectory of developments in the region generally and in Afghanistan particularly.

For this trajectory to be in a positive direction, the onus is on both Pakistan and ISAF to clear mutual suspicion and anxieties that is the product of lack of a unified regional vision. If, from an ISAF perspective, the broader vision is to shape the regional environment aimed at containing regional powers, then Pakistan and ISAF may well be on the divergent paths while the negation of this vision will bolster the relationship.

Pakistan also expects ISAF to improve its performance in Afghanistan that creates conditions on the ground for reconciliation, integration and bringing the violence to manageable levels. On a parallel path, Pakistan expects to be in a decision-making loop at both strategic and tactical level for better coordination and management of border. Erecting a legitimate, all inclusive, accountable and representative political structure in Afghanistan is the most fundamental and toughest challenge faced by both, ISAF and Pakistan.

Finally, in the light of the discussion, can there be reasons for optimism for future? The answer remains unpredictable as too many complex variables are at play, some may not be in total control of stakeholders. What is hopeful, however, is an overall realization to bring the Afghan conflict to a responsible end, which has bled the region, hurt Pakistan badly and worried the entire world.

Being critical in nature, ISAF-Pakistan relationships could become a bridge between the two civilizations at a crucial juncture in human history and help bring a long lasting peace to Afghanistan, stability in the region and security to the world. Pakistan desires a peaceful, stable and friendly Afghanistan. Indeed, "We cannot wish for Afghanistan anything that we don't wish for Pakistan."⁴²

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