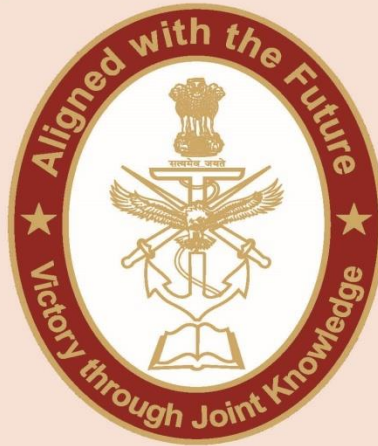


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AFGHANISTAN BEYOND US-TALIBAN TRUCE: IMPLICATION PARADIGMS

BY

LT GEN RAMESHWAR YADAV, PVSM, AVSM, VSM (RETD)

There is an air of positivity and hopes of reconciliation between the US and Taliban ushering in some normalcy with the main perpetrators of violence agreeing to a truce, albeit with conditions apply tags. The American military intervention in Afghanistan goes back to 2001, in the aftermath of terror attack on the twin towers in New York on 11 September 2001. The attack was perceived to be executed by the Al Qaida group who were believed to have patronage of Taliban government in the Afghanistan. The US gave ultimatum to the Taliban government to hand over the Al Qaida Chief Osama Bin Laden and other leaders plus stop patronizing the terror groups on their territory.

The Taliban asked for evidence of involvement of the Al Qaida in twin tower attack and even offered to conduct a trial if alleged perpetrators were traced in their country. The US, based on apparent substantial intelligence on the presence of anti US terror groups, chose to intervene in Afghanistan on 07 October 2001. It was apparently in pursuance of security and safe guarding the citizen and structures of the Western countries across the globe. Whereas, it was primarily geo politics of oil and gas which seem to be under play, an unfinished agenda of US in the aftermath of Russian withdrawal from the Afghanistan. The Americans alongside their NATO allies embarked upon their 'Global War on Terror' (GWOT) with military campaign code named as 'Operation Enduring Freedom'.

The Al Qaida Chief was finally eliminated on 02 May 2011 found in a safe house in the Pakistan. Subsequently, the President Obama on 23 May 2013 announced winding up of the GWOT and later on 28 December 2014 he declared that combat role of US forces in Afghanistan was also over. The US intentions of draw down from Afghanistan was rolling now with number of hiccups due to emergence of ISIS and also increased violence by the Taliban. The 18 year long campaign has been generally futile and resulted in senseless violence on daily basis and untold miseries to the Afghan people. The country stands devastated politically and economically with social fabric in total disarray.

Afghanistan has always being a gateway for land locked countries of West Asia and Eurasia to access greater India of yore. It consists of roughly eight mutually exclusive geographical entities with fiercely independent tribes who could never be conquered, or subjugated beyond a short time span all through its history. **The psyche of Afghanis continue to resonate their mediaeval religious mindset wherein the democracy has little meaning to them in the face of tribal feudal system and uncompromising attitude as regards to their tribal social milieu.** Therefore, the anatomy of rebellious emotional quotient continues to be the same even today, when it comes to outsiders trying to intrude into their socio-political turf.

Taliban continue to be a force to reckon with indulging in coercive terror operations on daily basis against the Afghan government forces and the American/NATO troops. As a result, it has turned out to be the longest US military intervention campaign which is proving to be a futile exercise at the end of the day. US seems to be keen to move out of Asian landscape in the emerging geo political equations with their own substantial energy production, besides ever increasing public opinion for pull out of US troops fighting others battles.

While doing that, US would obviously like to move out from position of strength and install pro American political dispensations to take care of their strategic interests. Looking at complexity of politico - military situation and disturbed societal milieu, there seem to be no easy solutions in sight. There are far too many stake holders with varied vested interests impacting on feasibility of a clean break from the existing political mess. It surely would need optimal political convergence and compromises primarily with the Taliban alongside elected polity, tribal lobbies and the regional players otherwise the current state is likely to continue.

The US, following a pragmatic approach, has reached out to Taliban for reconciliation to end the bloodshed in Afghanistan which has been responded positively by them also as of now. The Russia has also been engaging the Taliban for quite some time, although from a different political approach. The US has nominated Zalmay Khalilzad an Afghan born American diplomat as the interlocutor to negotiate with the Taliban leadership. In order to soften the grounds for talks the co founder of Taliban Abdul Ghani Akhund known as Mullah Baradar was released from a Pakistani jail in January 2019 who was captured earlier while entering Pakistan from Iran in 2010. Zabiullah Mujahid is the nominated representative from Taliban camp and Suhail Shaheen is the spokes person heading Taliban office in Doha in Qatar.

The US has been insisting on intra Afghan talks to work out a reasonably acceptable political set up before they finally wind up their mission. The Taliban had initially refused to come for intra Afghan talks as they were looking at establishing a government dominated by them. However, they seem to have reconciled on this issue as reported in the media. Taliban who could not be tamed even by the most advanced military have enough nuisance value to force their political will over other contenders. If their dictates are not agreed to, the cycle of violence is expected to continue, especially in absence of US forces

The society is already deeply fragmented with shifting loyalties and distrust on each other making it difficult for some kind of convergence on the issue of future governance. Even the recently held elections have not been accepted by the opposition and they are reported to be keen on establishing their separate parallel government. So there are already three sets of contenders to form government namely Taliban, elected political entity and the opposition. The local war lords have their own vested interests to capitalize on their bargaining power and are expected to indulge in political opportunism. **So, the security environment beyond US-Taliban truce is likely to be unpredictable looking at the far too many intrigues in the Afghani political pot.**

There is a question of future of Taliban cadres who have been indulging in violence against the state forces. How would they be rehabilitated, or like earlier times they will be let loose to perpetuate jihad in J&K on behest of Pakistan? What would be the policy on other terror organizations including ISIS once Americans are out? With such societal contradictions, security and economic challenges, it is going to be difficult to establish a stable national government in the country. Surely, it is going to be a long drawn affair before there is a semblance of political stability in Afghanistan.

Afghanistan is in a dire need of reconstruction of infrastructure and rehabilitation of the displaced population. It would require large financial resources which are not available with them forcing them to borrow from other countries. There are fair chances of countries providing such assistance to exploit their vulnerabilities including impacting on sovereign functions of the state direct or indirectly. The biggest problem of Afghanistan lies in her geographical location with strategic import. **Once US moves out of the region there would be powers keen to occupy the vacant strategic space and that's where the vows of Afghanistan are unlikely to be over, ever.**

Russia has been in touch with the Taliban for quite some time primarily to seek their support to check in spread of ISIS in the Afghanistan as it would impact on security matrix of Russia and her Central Asian allies. A secure Afghanistan also fits into their prospects of occupying the strategic space being vacated by the US in the Central, South as well as West Asia. **This strategic notion when hyphenated with their foot prints in the Syrian sector would help to facilitate "Bear hug from Mediterranean to Indian Ocean" an ambition since Czarist era.**

In that, Pakistan with their connectivity to the Indian Ocean is gradually becoming important to the Russia as central to their strategy. Russia, accordingly, has also shown their inclination to provide military hardware to Pakistan consequent to US restrictions on arms supply to them. Further to this, they have indicated their inclination to join the Chinese CPEC bandwagon with its potential of economic expansion through connectivity to the Indian Ocean. **All this is possible only when there is stability and peace in the Af-Pak region. In consequence, Russia has been in sync with the US in bringing about amicable reconciliation amongst the Afghan society.**

The BRI concept has been the biggest political investment of China in the recent times for their global economic expansion. China, therefore, is interested in resolving the Afghanistan political issues at the earliest in their own strategic interests. They have been in touch with the Afghanistan government as well as the Taliban to extend their help in arriving at an amicable solution. **China is supporting the Russian as well as the American initiatives as they see economic opportunities in post reconciliation period within as well as outside Afghanistan.**

Pakistan has their concept of achieving strategic depth against arch rival India through political synergy with the Taliban. Pakistan, with their complicity with the Taliban, do have reasonably high political leverages, an advantage they seem to be exploiting by positioning them

as central to any discussion on Afghanistan. Off late, Pakistan is much sought after and has become an important entity in the negotiations with the Taliban. However, Pakistan is likely to be pushing their own opportunist agenda keeping their strategic calculus in mind in the post reconciliation phase. **Taliban, in Pakistan army narrative, are viewed as strategic assets to upgrade the ante in J&K by replicating 1990 model once they come back to power .**

The Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan is reported to have reached Doha two days in advance where the US-Taliban peace deal is going to be signed as of now. It has obvious political signals and significance indicative of mix of solidarity with the Taliban and a friendly gesture towards the US in facilitating this contentious issue. The US in turn is seemed to be treating Pakistan as their frontline ally in the region once again. Pakistan facilitates US to dominate Iran as well as Afghanistan once they are out of the region. US, accordingly, is expected to support Pakistan to boost her economy and also provide assistance in upgrading their military. Pakistan has already extended invitation to the US to invest in CPEC infrastructure coming up in Pakistan. Whether they do it or not this being a Chinese project is a separate issue.

Pakistan has played their cards well by exploiting virtues of their location to enhance their national interests. Pakistan has already acquired high politico-military deterrence against her arch enemy India by joining the Chinese CPEC scheme. Now with US as well as Russian patronage she is going to be benefitted immensely in the post US-Taliban peace deal. **Apropos, Pakistan is likely to continue her anti India activities with impunity which not a good sign for Indian security interests.**

India on other hand was not involved in the entire negotiating process despite Indian support to the elected government in Afghanistan all through their bad times. India has been a major partner in large number of development projects. Chabahar port in Iran is one such project which has been designed for an alternate axis to connect Afghanistan and Central Asian Republics to rest of the world. Besides, this there is other infrastructure projects of economic value undertaken by India despite the volatile situation in Afghanistan. India, in the post peace deal, needs to be cautious as bonhomie between Taliban and Pakistan with their politico-religious afflictions cannot be ignored.

India has a strong lobby in Afghanistan which is expected to ensure that India retains her strategic space being a major economy in

the region. Moreover, once Taliban become part of governance, their priority would shift to resettlement and reconstruction and do that India would continue to be valued partners. India also enjoys a reasonably high cultural connect with the Afghan people which would steer their political prudence in their future policies. India on her part need to be pro active in engaging with whichever variant of political dispensation emerges in Afghanistan in near future.

A constructive and cooperative environment in the region should be the envisaged objective as the end state. Working on the strength of Indian political leverages at regional as well as global level alongside soft power would be the key to achieving our national objectives. Indeed, it would be a testing time for Indian diplomacy to manage positive political synergies for India in the post reconciliation phase in Afghanistan. The military also has to be prepared for emerging threat due to likely influx of Taliban and consequent enhanced cross border terrorism by Pakistan.

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