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Is the US–Afghan Strategic Partnership in Doldrums?

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Abstract

As the search for the Afghan ‘end game’ has intensified in the United States, a Strategic Partnership Deal (SPD) entailing a limited but long-term presence of US forces in Afghanistan is seen as a crucial cornerstone to prevent the return of Afghanistan to the pre-9/11 days. A series of incidents such as the burning of the copy of the Holy Quran and the massacre of civilians at the hands of an American sergeant has yet again thrown the US ‘exit strategy’ into disarray. In the ensuing negotiations over the contentious conditionalities, the recent incidents have worked into tilting the balance in favour of President Hamid Karzai, a shift that could have telling effects on just not on the future US-Afghan relationship but also for the overall prospects of peace and stability in the war-torn country.

Introduction

The massacre of 16 civilians by an American sergeant, the Quran copy burning episode, the images of US soldiers urinating on the corpses of their Taliban adversaries, the mounting civilian casualties and controversial night raids combined with the anxiety emanating from the hasty announcements of exit - have added up and contributed to the differing perceptions on the nature of the partnership between the two allies, impacting on the future of peace and stability in Afghanistan. In the words of President Hamid Karzai, US-Afghan relations are at

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a breaking point. "It is by all means the end of the rope here. The end of the rope that nobody can afford such luxuries anymore"², he said. However, even as citadels crumble all around him, Karzai knows that with the string of errors perpetrated by the Americans of late, his bargaining power *vis-a-vis* the Americans has increased enormously. Will this tactical positioning accrue benefits for Afghanistan in the long-run remains a critical question? Will the concessions granted from such bargaining consolidate or result in a reversal of gains?

The Emerging Faultlines and Divergent Perceptions

Since early 2011, U.S. and Afghan officials have had series of meetings to ink a *Strategic Partnership Deal (SPD)* which will pave the way for retention of approximately 20,000 to 30,000 US troops in Afghanistan beyond 2014, the cut-off year for the withdrawal of all US troops from the war-torn country. These remaining troops, based in at least five bases (termed as 'joint facilities')³ in Afghanistan for the next two or three decades, would conduct specialised counter-terrorism operations and provide secondary (train and assist) support to the Afghan forces. Officials from both sides have met on several occasions, keeping such meetings far from the glaring eyes of the media, to finalise this long-term security agreement. However, such secrecy has only added to the anxieties both within Afghanistan and the region.

Irrespective of the fact that the deal is a crucial piece of agreement for the Afghan leaders, who are not yet in a position to provide security to its populace, Kabul has been playing a delicate balancing game. President Karzai and senior officials see an enduring American presence and broader strategic relationship as essential, in part to protect Afghanistan from the onslaught of the insurgency and its meddlesome neighbours and also for the survival of the present regime. At the same time, the Afghan officials had made it clear that the country will sign a long-term deal only if the US meets certain conditions.

Some of the main contentious issues laid out by the Afghans are: (a) the foreign troops should work within the Afghan legal framework; (b) they should not take prisoners or conduct night raids; (c) they must not own private prisons; (d) they have to equip the Afghan air force with F-16 fighter jets and Abrams tanks; and (e) US troops cannot launch operations outside

² "Questions abound 1 week after U.S. soldier allegedly kills Afghan civilians", *CNN* (17 March 2012), http://articles.cnn.com/2012-03-17/asia/world_asia_afghanistan-shooting-soldier_1_soldier-afghan-civilians-joint-base-lewis-mcchord/3?_s=PM:ASIA. Accessed on 18 March 2012.

³ The term 'joint facilities' is used to dispel suspicion and opposition to the strategic bases both inside and outside Afghanistan. Discussions with key Afghan officials in January 2012 and May-June 2011 and US officials in Washington D.C. in May 2011. Shanthie Mariet D'Souza, "The Emerging Faultlines of the US-Afghan Strategic Partnership", *ISAS Brief No. 210* (10 August 2011), http://www.isas.nus.edu.sg/Attachments/PublisherAttachment/ISAS_Brief_210_-_Email_The_Emerging_Faultlines_15082011115335.pdf. Accessed on 16 March 2012.

Afghanistan from these bases, thus precluding the possibility of Abbottabad-type raids that killed Osama bin Laden.⁴

Tragedy of Errors: Tilting the Balance?

The 11 March massacre in Kandahar and other incidents prior to that, point at the schism between the two allies. The American rationale that such incidents are an 'aberration'⁵ and the civilian casualties are 'collateral damages'⁶ caused not out of deliberate intent, but by accident- has very few takers in rural Afghanistan. For the Afghans, the killings indicate a lackadaisical attitude from the very forces who are assigned to provide them protection. The massacre has led to demands inside Afghanistan that the US sergeant should be tried in the country for committing such a heinous crime.

Following the killing, President Hamid Karzai met with US Defence Secretary Leon Panetta in Kabul and demanded that NATO forces pull back from Afghan villages and relocate to their bases. This position is merely populist and also highly untenable as the withdrawal of the international forces would invariably pave the way for an unimpeded Taliban control over the countryside, especially when the insurgents are readying themselves for the spring offensive. Moreover, the Taliban miss no opportunity to work these incidents, killings into their narrative. They seem to ride on the wave of the rising anti-American sentiment in the rural areas of South Afghanistan.

Karzai's stance is a curious medley of his frustration with the conduct of the international forces, his attempt to secure credibility among the Afghan civilian population and also to boost his own political prospects. If the urgency demonstrated to get out of the 'long war' has invariably made the American position vis-a-vis the Taliban insurgents appear weak, the recent spate of incidents too have been ably used by President Karzai to augment his own bargaining power and consolidate his position beyond 2014. It indeed represents a curious turnaround for the President who has faced the flak for several years from several American officials for presiding over a corrupt and ineffective regime known more for its indulgence in rigging the elections rather than ensuring transparent governance.

⁴ "Long-term deal with U.S. must be on Afghan terms: Karzai", *Voice of America* (26 July 2011), <http://www.voanews.com/english/news/asia/south/Long-term-Deal-With-US-Must-be-on-Afghan-Terms-Says-Karzai-126177223.html>. Accessed on 16 March 2012.

⁵ According to the United Nations, Afghan civilians were killed in war-related incidents at a rate of more than eight per day last year: 3,021 in all. Insurgents were blamed for nearly four in five of those deaths. Laura King, "U.S.-Afghan divide seen in perceptions of village massacre", *Los Angeles Times*, (17 March 2012), <http://www.latimes.com/news/nationworld/world/la-fg-afghanistan-killings20120318,0,1087725.story>. Accessed on 18 March 2012.

⁶ David Rothkopf, "A New Challenge for Our Military: Honest Introspection", *Foreign Policy* (19 March 2012), http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2012/03/19/a_new_challenge_for_our_military_honest_introspection. Accessed on 20 March 2012.

Not surprisingly, Afghans under President Karzai have attempted to use the SPD as an instrument to set binding deadlines for their assumption of control of detention centres and controversial US military night time raids. US officials initially insisted that such timelines should be based on conditions on the ground and that the partnership declaration is not the forum in which to settle them.⁷ The Americans are in a hurry to get the deal sealed before the Chicago summit in May 2012 and have been trying to de-link the conditionalities from the SPD. But President Karzai remains adamant on issue of night raids and control of detention centres like the Bagram prison, which hold the most notorious Taliban leaders and local commanders.⁸ At the time of negotiations with the Taliban by individual countries, like the Qatar process by the Americans, Karzai wants to demonstrate his role with an image make over for a leader branded as an American puppet by the Taliban and his detractors.

In an environment of depleting interest and raging domestic debate on the long war, with the Afghan war being the centre stage of the presidential debates, the Obama administration appears more than willing to concede to the Afghan wish list. For instance, after the Quran copy burning episode, in early March 2012, the US agreed to accelerate its transfer of imprisoned insurgents to Afghan government control. Even though it insisted on a veto power over the ones that can be released, the move was a major concession to the Afghans. The U.S. believes that the veto power, which would last as long as American troops are in Afghanistan, addresses American worries that human right violators as also Taliban fighters would be released prematurely and return to the battlefield.⁹ In yet another concession, the Obama administration is now reportedly considering the idea of giving Afghan legal and judicial authorities review rights in regard to night raids.¹⁰ Such concessions would have been unimaginable had a winter of weakness not set in the U.S. approach towards Afghanistan, following these string of errors.

The hope that at least some progress could be reported regarding the negotiations with the Taliban, another crucial component of the endgame, too appeared to have been neutralised. After having been provided with an address for negotiations in Qatar, the Taliban too are mounting pressure on the U.S. and playing hard to get. They have reportedly suspended the process of negotiations complaining against what they termed as "the shaky, erratic and

⁷ Joshua Partlow, "Talks on long-term Afghan-U.S. partnership stalled", *The Washington Post* (29 July 2011), http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia-pacific/talks-on-long-term-afghan-us-partnership-stalled/2011/07/27/gIQAAX0Afl_story.html. Accessed on 30 July 2011.

⁸ Nasruddin Hemati, "The Naïve Risky Move", *Daily Outlook Afghanistan* (14 March 2012), http://outlookafghanistan.net/topics?post_id=3667. Accessed on 18 March 2012.

⁹ Rod Nordland, "U.S. and Afghanistan Agree on Prisoner Transfer as Part of Long-Term Agreement", *The New York Times* (9 March 2012), <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/10/world/asia/us-and-afghanistan-agree-on-detainee-transfer.html>. Accessed on 10 March 2012.

¹⁰ The Obama administration was discussing options with the Afghans including a warrant-based approach or possibly allowing local judges to review the raids before they occurred. Missy Ryan and Rob Taylor, "U.S. mulls changes to controversial Afghan night raids", *Reuters*, (21 March 2012), <http://af.reuters.com/article/worldNews/idAFL3E8EK20X20120321>. Accessed on 21 March 2012

vague"¹¹ standpoint of the Americans. For the Taliban, negotiating with a retreating army that is losing the ‘hearts and minds’ battle is not a game changer. They are biding time as the U.S. military commits more of such follies, helping them build on their narratives in the Afghan hinterland that would eventually pave the way for their return to Kabul.

SPD: The Path to ‘Nowhere’?

For the U.S., it is a time for unfounded hope. Sources within the U.S. administration continue to maintain a confident posture regarding the deal. There is even optimism that the differences will be bridged and the deal will be signed before the upcoming Chicago summit in May. However, as events unfold and Afghanistan continues to witness one catastrophe after the other, the prospects of such compromises are fading. What is evident is hardening of the position of the Karzai regime.

It is, thus, a clear clash between a weakened U.S. position and an assertive Karzai who is bidding for his own regime’s survival by positioning to derive benefits from the SPD and also from his overtures to the Taliban and the hardliners, which has come to resemble a clueless pivot of an escapist ideology. In granting concessions, to ensure a long term presence, the U.S. policy makers seem to be undercutting what is crucial to Afghanistan’s long term stability- effective governance, transparency, accountability and rule of law. Under these circumstances, only the most ardent optimists would resist the temptations of predicting Afghanistan's return to days of total anarchy, far worse than the 1990s.

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¹¹ Rob Taylor and Jack Kimball, “Karzai asks NATO to quit Afghan villages; Taliban end talks”, *Reuters* (15 March 2012), <http://in.reuters.com/article/2012/03/15/afghanistan-taliban-idINDEE82E0AI20120315>. Accessed on 16 March 2012.