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A Possible Paradigm for Afghanistan's Future

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The most important question confronting us in Afghanistan is this: what is the best method by which individual state-interactions with Afghanistan, or among the state- and non-state actors, may be managed, organised and coordinated in such a fashion as to bring stability and harmony to Afghanistan, to the extent possible, when the ISAF forces are largely gone. The global, in particular, the regional matrix is not any more secure than it was when the ISAF forces had gone in, in the first place. A similar foreign intervention in Iraq seems to have ultimately found fruition in the birth of a virulent resistance in the form of ISIS. In the view of a senior UN official, the Taliban would be watching the developments in Iraq closely, and drawing lessons from it.² In Afghanistan itself the pre-US and Western withdrawal phase is becoming increasingly problematic.

For fear that the situation may worsen, capital is already fleeing Afghanistan, and this would increase after 2014, unless confidence was restored; this is all the more true as “the promised

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² Discussions with Dr Jahangir Khan, UN Coordinator for Counterterrorism Task Force, New York, 12 June 2014.

US and western aid of over US\$ 6 billion a year is unsustainable, which is many times more than what the US provides even Israel”³ It would not be wrong to assess, therefore, that “the complex transition (in) Afghanistan is subject to a myriad variables”.⁴ It is obvious that unilateral interventions, or even those that are plurilateral (‘coalition of the willing’), had failed. In the words of Peter Marsden, already some years ago, it had become apparent “the three major powers (British, Soviet, and American-led) which intervened in Afghanistan proved to be unsuccessful in the pursuit of their strategic goals. Their inability to win the support of the Afghan population has been a major factor in their failure to achieve these goals. In fact, their tendency to inflame opinion has been an important characteristic of their interventions”.⁵ Invaders have learnt that “Afghanistan, then as now, is easy to take but almost impossible to hold, and fatal to leave”.⁶ Obviously what is now required is deep reflection and even thinking ‘out of the box’.

The US-led intervention has run its course. Yet Afghanistan could not be left to fend for itself, as yet. So under the circumstances, what is to be done?

One thing is certain. It is obvious that there is no longer any scope for a re-enactment of the 19th or 20th century ‘Great Game’ of the powerful global actors in Afghanistan.⁷ Dominique de Villepin, the former French Prime Minister, whose warnings (then as the French Foreign Minister) against the military invasion of Saddam Hussain’s Iraq made in a stirring speech at the UN Security Council had gone famously unheeded, has warned again on today’s Middle East, that: “The big powers should not play around in the (Middle East region): that role should be left to the regional powers”.⁸ But this should not also imply an open invitation to the regional powers to play out their own politics. For instance, in Afghanistan it should not result in a restaging of a new ‘Small Game’ of the neighbourhood actors (‘Great’ and ‘Small’ are, of course, relative terms, and today’s ‘small’ powers may be wielding greater ‘strength’ than the ‘Great powers of the past’). Then, might it be a broad front of the international

³ Discussions with Sorbuland Khan, former UN Director for Economic and Social Affairs, New York, 11 June 2014.

⁴ Toby Dodge and Nicholas Redman (eds.), *Afghanistan to 2015 and Beyond* (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2011), p. 19.

⁵ Peter Marsden, *Afghanistan: Aid, Armies, and Empires* (London: I.B. Taurus & Co Ltd, 2009), p. 227.

⁶ Air Commodore (Retd.) Khalid Iqbal, ‘Rear Mirror: British Invasions and Retreat from Afghanistan. In *Criterion* (Quarterly), Islamabad, Volume 9, Number 2. April/June 2014, p.86.

⁷ The expression ‘Great Game’, in describing the Russo-British machinations on Afghanistan, has been attributed to a 19th century British military officer, Arthur Conolly, to be later introduced to mainstream political consciousness by the British novelist, writer, and journalist, Rudyard Kipling, in particular in his novel *Kim*.

⁸ Remarks at the Third World Peace Forum, Beijing, 22 June 14.

community, represented by the primary global institution the United Nations (UN), and the regional powers with the greatest stakes, in a positively directed combination? Let us examine.

In a report of the UN Secretary General, submitted to the General Assembly, it was stated, and it is worth quoting in full: “Uncertainty dominates Afghanistan’s final year of transition and has an impact on political, security, economic, and social developments. The international presence will be dramatically reduced, and Afghanistan’s future leadership is not yet decided upon. In this context it is critical that predictability and confidence, where feasible, be reinforced. The United Nations has been a force in Afghanistan for decades. Its countrywide presence and its good offices, human rights, coordination of international aid, and humanitarian assistance functions will remain important. The precise ways in which the Organization can best support Afghanistan and its people will necessarily evolve to reflect the changing circumstances”.⁹ In the final sentence quoted, Secretary General Ban ki-Moon pointed to a changing role of the United Nations in Afghanistan, in line with changing circumstances.

Thereafter, on 17 March 2014, the UN Security Council adopted its Resolution 2145 on Afghanistan. Its 49 operative paragraphs signalled a continuing role of the UN and in particular the Security Council, “aimed at achieving a peaceful, stable, and prosperous Afghanistan”. It endorsed the Istanbul and the ‘Heart of Asia’ processes among other things, and urged their continuation. It expressed full support for the work of the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), and importantly, long-term UN commitment, including ‘beyond 2014, and into the Transformation Decade, to support the Government and the people of Afghanistan’.¹⁰

There is another UN principle that would justify a deeper association of the world body in a future Afghanistan. This is known as the ‘Responsibility to Protect’ (or as R2P in brief) which was adopted as a part of the ‘Outcome Document’ of the World Summit held in New York in September 2005.¹¹ The principle was based on three pillars: One, states have the primary responsibility to protect their citizens from genocide, war-crimes, crimes against

⁹ The situation in Afghanistan and its implications for international peace and security: Report of the Secretary General, General Assembly/Security Council, A/68/788-S/2014/163, 7 March 2014.

¹⁰ See, Resolution 2145 (2014), adopted by the Security Council at its 7139th meeting, on 17 March 2014, S/RES/2145 (2014), 17 March 2014.

¹¹ For a detailed enunciation of the principle, see Iftexhar Ahmed Chowdhury, The Sri Lankan Situation and the principle of the ‘Responsibility to Protect’, ISAS Insights No.61, 30 April 2009.

humanity, and ethnic cleansing; two, the international community is committed to providing assistance to states in building capacity to protect their population from the four crimes; and three, if states manifestly fail to provide such protection, the responsibility to do so would devolve upon the international community, who would undertake it, working through the UN, particularly the Security Council.¹² It is to be noted thus that R2P does not only imply military interventions after the crimes have occurred, but also acting well in time to prevent such situations from occurring in the first place. It would appear that the case of Afghanistan, post ISAF withdrawal, should provide an appropriate opportunity for a positive application of the principle.

It is therefore suggested that, upon the withdrawal of ISAF from Afghanistan, the governance of the country pass on for the next ten years or so, the 'Transitional Decade' as referred to in the latest Security Council resolution on the country, to a mechanism specially created for the purpose by the UN and the Afghan authorities working together. This would comprise the President of Afghanistan and the Secretary General of the United Nations acting as co-chairs of the 'Afghanistan Governing Council' (AGC). The Council would comprise, apart from the two, nominated senior and tested officials or representatives (one each, working full-time, for an extendable five-year term) from neighbouring countries, and near-neighbours, with the highest stakes: Iran, Pakistan, India, China, Russia, Turkey, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan.

Afghanistan would of course remain sovereign, and the Cabinet would continue to function, but all major policy decisions would require to be endorsed by the AGC, which would meet on a regular basis, inside and when feasible, outside Afghanistan (an idea would be each member-country and the UN taking turns to host it). The AGC would have the right to take up any agenda or issue as it would deem fit. Initially, Turkey, perhaps the most acceptable party to all (Afghan) sides, would provide troops, reporting to the AGC, which could eventually, upon consensus, include soldiers from other AGC member-states. But, like UN 'Green-helmets', participants would be required to meet major costs (except Turkey), which would restrain competition among themselves to get involved, in furtherance of perceived national interests. They will also continue to train and support the Afghan National Forces.

¹² This third element of the principle was inserted to actually avoid such unilateral actions as by the US and the UK with regard to Iraq in 2003. Having to work through the UN was the safeguard that finally persuaded such detractors like India, Pakistan, Iran, Cuba, and South Africa to lift their objections to the adoption of R2P as a part of the Outcome Document passage. The author, who was then the Bangladesh Ambassador and Permanent Representative to the United Nations, assisted the negotiations for its passage as a 'Facilitator of UN Reforms', appointed by the President of the General Assembly.

The UN would raise extra-budgetary resources to fund the AGC. It is presumed that wealthy Middle Eastern sovereign-fund holders, the Islamic Development Bank and others interested in a 'secure, stable and prosperous Afghanistan', would support the mechanism materially, and generously.

Though the UN Secretary General would be a key component of AGC, and the UN would help raise resources to fund it, the mechanism will operate outside the framework of the UN. This would bring into play in much broader relief the office that has "accrued an aura of leadership as embodiment of the international community, and in promoting collective efforts towards addressing common problems".¹³ This 'out of the box' thinking is designed to exclude, or at least keep confined to a minimal level, 'big power' rivalries, as is wont to happen when the Security Council and the 'Permanent Five' (the UK, the US, Russia, China and France) get involved. This solution is not ideal and will require much sharpening and honing, but hopefully, all concerned parties will undertake such exercises with a genuine desire to address a crisis, that unless stemmed, would have extremely negative ramifications for the future of the region and the world.

The AGC would also be tasked to undertake a Constitutional Review. The current Afghan Constitution was drafted by the 'Constitutional *Loya Jirga* (Grand Council)', a 502-member body formed in 2003, and signed into the supreme law of the land by President Karzai in January 2004. The President is assisted by two Vice-Presidents. The legislature comprises the *Wolesi Jirga*, the more powerful Lower House of the people, and the *Meshrano Jirga* or a Council of Elders. There is a nine-member Supreme Court, the pecking order of whose loyalties are to Islam, the Constitution, and other laws. It will follow both Sunni and Shiia jurisprudence, depending upon the nature of the case. This Constitution was not easily crafted; that probably does not reflect the complexities of the evolving Afghan politics. An American study noted that the Afghans were learning the ropes of democracy; and many of them thought it was too soon to write a Constitution. According to the study "many continue to see the constitution as an idealistic document, unconcerned with the problems of warlordism and factionalism that have plagued Afghanistan since the fall of the Taliban".¹⁴

Given that every contest for high office has been fraught with disenchantment, and there is insufficient federalism devolving powers to the provinces, constitutional review must of

¹³ Edward Newman, 'Secretary General' in Thomas G. Weiss and Sam Daws, *The Oxford Handbook on the United Nations*, Oxford University Press, 2007, p.179.

¹⁴ Program for Culture and Conflict Studies, www.nps.edu/programs/CCS

necessity be a continuous process. The AGC could undertake necessary modifications, and submit the final version to a national referendum at the end of its tenure.

During the post—election imbroglio between the Presidential campaigns of the two contenders, Ashraf Ghani Ahmedzai and Abdullah Abdullah in July 2014, the outgoing US Special Envoy James Dobbins remarked: “I think the election impasse is serious and would present a real danger of a division in the country. It is not unnatural for countries at this level of development. They don’t tend to have the tradition of good losers”.¹⁵ Dobbins was repeating the sentiments of Henry Kissinger, expressed some years ago. He had said: “In most parts of the world, the state has preceded the nation. It was and often remains the principal element in forming it. Political parties, where they exist, reflect fixed, usually communal identities of minorities and majorities usually tend to be permanent. In such societies, and alternation in office, which takes place, if at all, by coups rather than by constitutional procedures. The concept of a loyal opposition – the essence of modern democracy – rarely prevails. Much more frequently opposition is viewed as a threat to national cohesion equated with treason, and ruthlessly suppressed”.¹⁶ Afghanistan is a classic case in point.

It is true that US Secretary of State John Kerry, through persistent hard work, was able to bring about a modicum of understanding between the two feuding Presidential contenders. It was that all eight million votes cast in the disputed Presidential election of 2014, to choose a successor to President Hamid Karzai, would be audited.¹⁷ It is worth recalling that many considered Karzai’s own re-election in 2009 fraudulent, which has ever since remained an apple of discord between him and the Americans, substantially straining relations. Though both Ashraf Ghani Ahmedzai, a former World Bank economist, and Abdullah Abdullah, a former Foreign Minister as well as an earlier Presidential candidate, have agreed to abide by the result of the audit, the loser is bound to be disgruntled with his entire ethnic following. The time when such consensus can be forged in Afghanistan has not yet come. Till it does, and hopefully a decade should be sufficient, the AGC would remain a useful, indeed necessary, tool of governance.

Unfortunately, for quite some time to come, Western or US’ intentions in Afghanistan would remain suspect. Noting how in Iraq in 2003 the ‘UN was guided by the US’, the noted

¹⁵ International New York Times, 3 July 2014,

¹⁶ Henry Kissinger, *Diplomacy* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994), p.811.

¹⁷ ‘Afghan Rivals agree on deal to audit votes’, *Straits Times*, 14 July 2014.

Canadian diplomat and analyst David Malone cites the French President Jacques Chirac, as saying: “A war of this kind (Iraq) cannot help giving a big lift to terrorism. It would create a large number of little bin Ladens.”¹⁸ The question is of not just creating terrorists, but also stoking the fire of Islamist fundamentalism, both of the Shia and Sunni varieties. As the writer W Darlymple had noted: “...nothing threatens the moderate aspect of Islam so much as the aggressive western intervention and interference in the East, as nothing so dramatically radicalizes the ordinary Muslim and feeds the power of the extremists...in the celebrated words of Edmund Burke, ‘those who fail to learn from history are always destined to repeat it’”.¹⁹

The remarkable rise and spread of the Islamic State, formerly known as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), and the declaration of its leader Abu Bakr al Baghdadi as its Caliph, Ibrahim, is something that can only be ignored at our peril. It already occupies a vast swathe of land stretching from Aleppo in northern Syria to Diyala province in Eastern Iraq.²⁰ In many ways, it has already eroded the authority of the Al-Qaeda leader, Ayman al-Zawahiri.²¹ In some ways the ‘Caliphate’ harkens back to the days of Islam’s lost glories, which can be a powerful potent for many present-day Muslims, who see themselves on the wrong side of history. The Islamic State, though it does control territories, professes to be extra-territorial, seeking to control minds. There is the ever-present danger that the unwary may fall prey to it. What is there to prevent, say the ‘Boko Haram’ in Nigeria, or the Taliban in Afghanistan, from declaring their allegiance to it? Unless some rapid advance is made towards calming the situation down in Afghanistan, this threat will remain pervasive. The best way to go about doing this is perhaps to put a workable mechanism to oversee governance in Afghanistan in the next phase, following the complete withdrawal of Western military presence in Afghanistan, and the installations of new Presidents in Kabul in 2014, and in Washington in 2017.

The Tate Gallery in London owns a painting, often out on loan, by Lady Elizabeth Butler, depicting a scene from the First Anglo-Afghan War of 1842. It is called ‘The Remnants of an Army’, and depicts just that, in the form of a British Army officer, a surgeon, William Brydon, said to be the sole survivor of an invading force of 4500, straggling to safely on

¹⁸ David M. Malone , *The International Struggle over Iraq: Politics in the UN Security Council 1980-2005* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p.198

¹⁹ William Darlymple, *The Last Mughal: The Fall of a Dynasty, Delhi, 1857* Penguin Books, 2004, p.487

²⁰ *Independent*, Dhaka, 1 July, 2014.

²¹ Afzal Ashraf, ‘The myth of the caliphate and the Islamic State’, Al Jazeera, 10 July 2014. <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2014/07/myth-caliphate-islamic-state-20147...16/7/2014>.

horseback, near-collapse from exhaustion, at the end of a long retreat from Kabul. It has since been a metaphor for all invaders into Afghanistan. It always ends in a defeat for the spirit and body.

But how would the Afghans react to outsiders who would come in with a genuine offer to assist in stabilising their war-torn land? Would their traditional ethos of the generous host then come to the fore? The international community will need to withstand that test once the invaders go home and the next phase begins. Inaction in that phase for the international community is not an option. It will need to take initiatives, starting with the mechanism proposed. As the Bengali poet, the mighty Rabindranath Tagore, said, should you wish to cross the sea, it would not do to stay at its edge, and simply stare at the waters!

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