

Post-2014 Transition in Afghanistan: Options for India

Gurmeet Kanwal

Security Environment in Afghanistan

The establishment of an office by the Taliban at Doha, Qatar, in June 2013 for reconciliation talks with the Afghan government and the US, and its prompt rejection by President Karzai, show how tenuous the situation in Afghanistan has rapidly become since the commencement of withdrawal by the US and North Atlantic Treaty Organisation-International Security Assistance Force (NATO-ISAF) forces. In 2011, President Barack Obama had approved plans to drawdown 10,000 US troops from Afghanistan during that year and another 23,000 in 2012. The present number of troops stands at approximately 63,000 and will decline to 34,000 by February 2014. The withdrawal of the remaining combat troops is to be completed by December 2014. A small number of troops is likely to be left behind at Kabul, Bagram and Kandahar to provide training and logistics support and to continue the drone war against hardcore terrorists inimical to US interests.

The NATO-ISAF withdrawal is likely to leave a security deficit in Afghanistan. There is no evidence at present that Washington and its allies are planning to help the Afghan government to maintain security by supplementing Afghan efforts through the deployment of a viable international peace-keeping force under a UN flag after the NATO-ISAF

Brigadier **Gurmeet Kanwal** (Retd) is former Director, Centre for Land Warfare Studies, New Delhi, Adjunct Fellow (Non-resident), CSIS, Washington, D.C. and a Delhi-based strategic analyst.

military withdrawal is completed in 2014. The willingness of regional actors to play a positive role in stabilising Afghanistan, rather than pursuing divergent national interests and disparate agendas, is also uncertain. Unless the Central Asian states, China, India, Iran, Pakistan and Russia jointly contribute towards ensuring stability, the security environment in Afghanistan is likely to deteriorate into a civil war.

The NATO-ISAF withdrawal is likely to leave a security deficit in Afghanistan.

The present security situation in Afghanistan can be described as a stalemate at both the strategic and operational levels as the US-led forces are not exactly losing and the Taliban are not winning. The fledgling Afghan National Army (ANA) and the Afghan National Police (ANP), which have now assumed full responsibility for security from the ISAF, are not yet equal to the task. Their numbers are small (352,000); they lack experience; the standards of junior leadership are low; and, they are inadequately trained and equipped. They lack heavy weapons, artillery, air support and helicopters for logistics support. They are poorly trained, badly led and lack the motivation necessary to sustain complex counter-insurgency operations on a prolonged basis. Fratricide and desertions with weapons are commonplace. Hence, the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) are not yet capable of undertaking counter-insurgency operations autonomously and need more time to settle down as cohesive infantry battalions.

While the ISAF forces control most of the large towns, the Taliban—together with the Al Qaeda—control large swathes of the countryside, particularly at night. Governance is virtually non-existent outside Kabul. Though significant funds are being expended on socio-economic development by the Afghan government as well as by donors like India (the US alone has pumped in \$56 billion), the results have consistently fallen short of the country's requirement. This is partly due to inadequate supervision and partly due to rampant corruption. Also, a large number of

The present security situation in Afghanistan can be described as a stalemate at both the strategic and operational levels as the US-led forces are not exactly losing and the Taliban are not winning.

development projects have been undertaken at places where these could be conveniently executed by the Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs), and not at places where the need was the greatest.

A stalemate between a superpower and a motley array of rag-tag militiamen of a non-state actor will be seen as a moral victory for the Taliban. The US strategy to clear-hold-build-transfer-exit has succeeded only partially as the Al Qaeda has not been completely eliminated. Hence, no matter

whether the Afghan government agrees to limit US presence to 10,000 to 12,000 soldiers or a lesser number, the Special Forces and drone strikes against the remnants of the Al Qaeda and the leaders of other organisations considered inimical to US national interests will continue, including on Pakistani soil, with or without the concurrence of the Pakistan government and Army.

External Challenges Faced by Afghanistan

The foremost challenge that Afghanistan faces is from Pakistan. It is the threat of trans-Durand Line hit-and-run strike operations from safe havens in Pakistan by groups like the Haqqani network against targets in Afghanistan. Mullah Omar's Quetta Shura, the Paktika-based Haqqani network and the Hizb-e-Islami, founded by Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, all operate out of bases inside Pakistani territory. Pakistani Ulema Council Chairman Tahir Ashrafi has sought to "legitimise" the Taliban insurgency. He has said that suicide attacks in Afghanistan were permitted under Islam as long as US forces were present.

Gen Sher Mohammad Karimi, Chief of Staff of the Afghan Army, said during an interview with the BBC on July 3, 2013, that the war

with the Taliban would be over in weeks if Pakistan so wished. Quite clearly, this is a perception shared by the Afghan government as well. The Afghan National Security Council (NSC) has called for Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) to be blacklisted. "The Government of Afghanistan and the people of Afghanistan have endeavoured to their last breath to have a good relationship with the Government of Pakistan based on a virtue of neighbourliness. However, in return, what did we see from Pakistan? They fire rockets, they send terrorists to our soil, they destroy our *jihadi* leaders, clerics, influences, our Mihrabs, our tribe, our mothers, sisters, brothers, students, children, soldiers and police," the Deputy National Security Advisor Rahmatullah Nabil said after a meeting of the Afghan NSC.

The Afghan High Peace Council (HPC) also reacted strongly to the statement of the Pakistani clerics, saying that the clerics' declaration contradicts every Islamic principle. The High Peace Council said that the people of Pakistan deserve better representation from their religious leaders, expecting the Government of Pakistan to impede war-making individuals and groups. In a weaker moment, President Karzai urged the Taliban to turn their guns on Pakistan.

As Afghanistan is a landlocked country, and for access to the sea for its exports and imports, it relies mainly on Pakistan. Despite the Afghanistan-Pakistan Transit and Trade Agreement (APTTA), which was implemented on June 12, 2011, Afghanistan continues to face several hurdles and delays in sending its goods across Pakistani territory. Unless these challenges are overcome, Afghanistan will find it difficult to undertake socio-economic development.

While the ISAF forces control most of the large towns, the Taliban— together with the Al Qaeda— control large swathes of the countryside, particularly at night. Governance is virtually non-existent outside Kabul.

Despite the Afghanistan-Pakistan Transit and Trade Agreement implemented on June 12, 2011, Afghanistan continues to face several hurdles and delays in sending its goods across Pakistani territory.

Threats that Pakistan Perceives from Afghanistan

The greatest challenge that the new Pakistan Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif faces is on the national security front. Fissiparous tendencies in Balochistan and the restive Gilgit-Baltistan Northern Areas are a perpetual security nightmare. Karachi remains a tinderbox that is ready to explode. The Al Qaeda has gradually made inroads into Pakistani terrorist organisations like the Lashkar-e-Tayyeba (LeT), the Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM), Harkat-ul-Jihad al-

Islami (HuJI), Tehreek-e-Nafaz-e-Shariat-e-Mohammadi (TNSM) and the Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ), and while it is still far from forming an umbrella organisation encompassing all of them, it is moving perceptibly in that direction. The Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) has consolidated its position in North and South Waziristan despite the Army's counter-insurgency campaign over the last two summers, and appears capable of breaking out of its stronghold to neighbouring areas. Only concerted Army operations launched with single-mindedness of purpose can stop the TTP juggernaut.

However, the fallout of the drawdown of the US-led NATO-ISAF forces by the end of 2014, will pose the most complex challenge to the new government as it is an external security threat with internal security linkages. The security vacuum that will be created by the departure of foreign troops from Afghan soil is likely to lead to a Taliban resurgence that the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF-Army plus the police) will be incapable of stemming.

The Karzai government is seen as an obstacle to the realisation of Pakistan's key objectives in Afghanistan due to its steady rejection of

Pakistan's overtures, including the use of its good offices for reconciliation negotiations with the Taliban. India's commitment to a strong and stable Afghanistan and its US\$ 2 billion investment in the country's reconstruction are a cause for concern in Pakistan, particularly among the security agencies. They resent Afghan calls for military aid from India due to fears of military encirclement – even though the Pakistan Army appears to have realised the folly of seeking 'strategic depth' in Afghanistan. To counter the perceived attempts at encirclement, the Pakistan Army and the ISI have begun to reach out to members of the erstwhile Northern Alliance.

India's commitment to a strong and stable Afghanistan and its US\$ 2 billion investment in the country's reconstruction are a cause for concern in Pakistan, particularly among the security agencies.

Another bone of contention is Pakistan's accusation that insurgent groups like the TNSM of 'Radio' Mullah Fazlullah, are operating out of secure bases in Afghanistan. At present, the Pakistan Army lacks the capacity to fight these groups across the Durand Line. However, it may have no option but to attempt to do so in case these groups step up their attacks post-2014 and the Afghan government is powerless to stop them. Such a scenario could even lead to state-on-state conflict in the worst case.

There are approximately 2.0 million Afghan refugees in Pakistan today. Most of them are Pashtuns. Besides being an economic burden, they are seen as a national security threat as the Afghan government does not recognise the Durand Line as the boundary with Pakistan. Though the Pashtuns in Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa are fairly well integrated with the national mainstream, separatist tendencies can come to the fore again. If the post-2014 security situation deteriorates into a civil war four to five years later – a probability that cannot be ruled out – Pakistan will be deluged with hundreds of thousands of additional refugees, further

There are approximately 2.0 million Afghan refugees in Pakistan today. Most of them are Pashtuns. Besides being an economic burden, they are seen as a national security threat as the Afghan government does not recognise the Durand Line as the boundary with Pakistan.

exacerbating the problem. Pakistan is hesitant to back Mullah Omar's Taliban fully because it is unsure of getting their unfettered support if the Taliban come back to power some time in the future.

Regional Instability

According to Ahmed Rashid, a perceptive observer of the developments in the Af-Pak region, it is necessary "to ensure that Pakistan, which gives sanctuary to the Taliban leadership, cooperates rather than sabotages the transition and the peace process, and allows the Taliban to hold

talks with Kabul on their own terms rather than on terms that Pakistan may impose. Further down the road is the need to ensure the promised international funding to keep the Afghan Army paid and fed, and to allow economic-development work to continue."

However, all hope is not lost – not as yet anyway. Rashid has written, "The ISI is in the process of freeing one hundred Taliban whom it earlier jailed, either for maintaining secret contacts with Kabul, the United Nations, and the Americans, or simply for refusing to dance to the ISI's tune. Most of these Taliban are so-called moderates who support an end to the war. Now the same ISI is pushing these freed Taliban to renew their contacts and discuss peace with their adversary. Despite continuing points of tension between the two countries, Kabul and Islamabad are finally cooperating rather than abusing each other. The military is now fully behind allowing the Taliban to open an office in Doha and will back Karzai in any initiative he takes."

While the Taliban have opened an "office" in Doha, Qatar, and reconciliation negotiations may begin soon, it would be premature at present to expect too much headway to be made. The Taliban have refused

to lay down their arms as a pre-condition and the Afghan government will find it difficult to negotiate with guns being held to their heads, even though the US is eager and willing. Unless reconciliation talks are Afghan-led and Afghan-owned, any agreement that might be reached will not last long. Also, the Taliban could be playing for time and the talks could be a ploy to rest, recoup and refit. It is hard to see them being serious about negotiations when they are on the verge of achieving a moral victory with the impending withdrawal of US forces.

It is essential for the international community to organise a “responsible withdrawal” from Afghanistan and not leave the country in the lurch.

Peace and stability in Afghanistan are critical for stability in the fragile South Asian region. However, the security situation that is likely to prevail in Afghanistan post-2014 is a cause for concern, as the ANSF appear incapable of ensuring a violence free security environment when they are given independent responsibility. This is due to the inadequacy of numbers, poor training, lack of the required arms and equipment and the proclivity of the ill-motivated soldiers to desert and refuse to fight. Junior leadership standards also leave much to be desired. It is essential for the international community to organise a “responsible withdrawal” from Afghanistan and not leave the country in the lurch, particularly in the field of security. Otherwise, the fallout from the planned NATO-ISAF drawdown will be extremely negative for the whole region.

The Afghanistan-Pakistan face-off could lead to an ugly civil war if it does not end soon. Under the circumstances, Afghanistan’s regional neighbours need to step in to fill the void. The Taliban and its affiliates like Al Qaeda must not be allowed ever again to launch international terrorist strikes from safe havens and sanctuaries within Afghanistan. Regional interests lie in a peaceful and stable Afghanistan that is governed by a broad-based government free of foreign interference in policy-making.

India's Policy Objectives

Afghanistan's location at the strategic crossroads between South Asia and Central Asia, and South Asia and the Middle East makes the country extremely important for India. India has historically had friendly ties with Afghanistan and wishes to see a stable government installed in Kabul that is independent of any external interference. It has funded some major Afghan reconstruction and development plans and has invested US\$ 2.0 billion so far. It has recently committed another US\$ 500 million. The funds have been spent on building the 218-km-long Zaranj-Delaram road linking the Iranian border with the Garland Highway, electric power lines including one from the Central Asian Republics (CARs) to Kabul, hydroelectric power projects, school buildings, primary health centres and the new building for the Afghan Parliament. India is also training Afghan administrators, teachers and officer cadets, but only within India. At present, there is no support in India for sending military troops to Afghanistan.

India signed an Agreement on Strategic Partnership with Afghanistan in October 2011. This agreement envisages close political cooperation with a mechanism for regular consultations. It seeks to launch joint initiatives on regional and international issues and to cooperate at the United Nations and in multinational fora. The two sides also agreed to initiate a strategic dialogue to provide a framework for cooperation in the field of national security. Security cooperation is intended to enhance their mutual efforts in the fight against international terrorism, organised crime, illegal trafficking in narcotics, money laundering, and so on. India also agreed to assist in the training, equipping and capacity building programmes for the ANSF. The two sides committed themselves to "strengthening trade, economic, scientific and technological cooperation, as well as cooperation between other bodies of business and industry representatives, with a view to expanding trade and economic relations." Both countries also agreed to promote regional economic cooperation.

India committed itself to continue to provide assistance for Afghanistan's reconstruction and development programmes and capacity building, particularly in the fields of governance, education, health and technical training. Given its vast experience in the field, India would also like to offer its help to Afghanistan to further democracy, particularly at the grassroots level.

India's policy objectives flow out of the strategic partnership agreement signed with Afghanistan. These are naturally tempered by various constraining factors, including the prevailing security situation and Pakistan's continuing interference in Afghan affairs through proxies such as the Haqqani network, which has been declared to be a terrorist organisation by the US State Department. In fact, it is the considered Indian view that Afghanistan's problems cannot be resolved unless the linkages with Pakistan are also addressed simultaneously. Also, India's efforts to provide assistance to Afghanistan are hampered considerably by the lack of geographical contiguity and limited access. India is making serious efforts to remove Pakistan's misapprehensions about India's role in Afghanistan, but Pakistan has steadfastly refrained from discussing this issue with India because of mutual suspicions. It is crucial for India and Pakistan to discuss their suspicions at the official level so as to allay each other's apprehensions and work together for peace and stability.

India seeks a peaceful and stable Afghanistan with a broad-based government that is genuinely independent in formulating its foreign and national security policies, as well as in governing the country in consonance with Afghan customs and traditions. India believes that the imposition of the Western model of democracy will not be appropriate as it will not work in Afghanistan's socio-political milieu. India would like to see the elimination of terrorism from Afghanistan and the destruction

It is the considered Indian view that Afghanistan's problems cannot be resolved unless the linkages with Pakistan are also addressed simultaneously.

India believes that the imposition of the Western model of democracy will not be appropriate as it will not work in Afghanistan's socio-political milieu.

of all sanctuaries of the Taliban and international terrorist groups like the Al Qaeda so that there is no export of terrorism from the country. India supports the integration and strengthening of military and police forces at the national level, rather than their domination by one or more ethnic communities. India would like to encourage Afghanistan's regional neighbours and the international community to further enhance their efforts towards reconstruction and economic development.

India's political, national security and economic policy objectives are listed below. These objectives are dynamic and need to be constantly reviewed and modified based on emerging developments.

Political Objectives

- Orderly transition to the installation of an independent Afghan government that is free of foreign influence.
- Ensure Afghanistan does not again become a base and safe haven for terrorists and infrastructure.
- Counter Pakistan's agenda of seeking strategic depth in Afghanistan through diplomatic means.
- Acquire access to Afghanistan and through it to the CARs.
- Establish broad-based engagement with all political groups.
- Support Afghan-led broad-based reconciliation efforts, as visualised by the Afghan High Peace Council.
- Assist Afghanistan to train its administrative and judicial staff to improve governance and the delivery of justice.
- Enhance people-to-people contacts.

National Security Objectives

- Support the capacity building efforts of the ANSF by ensuring implementation of the Strategic Partnership Agreement, including the supply of war-like stores.
- Ensure the safety and protection of Indian assets and infrastructure in Afghanistan.
- Intelligence cooperation and sharing.

India must not hesitate to provide a post-2014 stabilisation force if requested by Karzai's successor government.

Economic Objectives

- Increase trade with Afghanistan and through it with the CARs.
- Increase Indian business investment in Afghanistan.
- Assist Afghanistan to develop its natural resources.
- Further increase India's reconstruction and capacity building programme.
- Enhance India's energy security; for example, through the commissioning of the Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan, India (TAPI) pipeline.
- Assist Afghanistan to replace narcotics-based agriculture with regular agriculture.
- Work towards implementation of a South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA).
- Promote India-China cooperation on Afghanistan.

Should India Intervene Militarily in Afghanistan?

While India must continue to support development and reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan, provide training support and deliver the war-like stores that the Afghan government has asked for, India must not hesitate to provide a post-2014 stabilisation force if requested by Karzai's successor government. There is an urgent need to supplement the capabilities of the Afghan security forces. Unless the key regional neighbours,

Pakistan will be extremely reluctant to accept Indian troops being positioned in the Jalalabad-Ghazni-Kandahar areas, which are the worst affected, as it will see such presence as a direct military threat.

including India, Iran and Pakistan, contribute meaningfully to the efforts to stabilise the country, rather than pursuing narrow national agendas, Afghanistan is bound to be plunged into civil war.

Peace and stability in Afghanistan are vital national interests for India. It is a country with which India has traditionally enjoyed warm and friendly relations. Since the overthrow of the Taliban regime in 2001-02, India has contributed only soft power to the international reconstruction effort in Afghanistan. As mentioned earlier, it has spent over US \$2.0 billion in constructing the Delaram-Zaranj

Highway, building and running schools and hospitals and in training members of the fledgling Afghan administration.

Vital interests, by definition, must be defended by force, if necessary. As an aspiring though reluctant regional power, India must overcome its fear of overseas military interventions – occasioned by the ill-advised and unsuccessful foray into Sri Lanka in the 1980s – and stand up and be counted as a genuine rising power that is willing to discharge legitimate regional responsibilities. Under the right conditions – Afghan government concurrence, UN flag, multinational force, viable logistics support – it should be possible to persuade India to send up to one infantry division (15,000 troops) to supplement the ANSF. A fresh UN Security Council mandate will be necessary under Chapter 7 of the UN Charter.

Pakistan will be extremely reluctant to accept Indian troops being positioned in the Jalalabad-Ghazni-Kandahar areas, which are the worst affected, as it will see such presence as a direct military threat. Its worst fears of Indian military encirclement will come true. It will be more prudent to send Indian troops to either Mazar-e-Sharif in the north or

Herat in the west. Surely, Pakistan cannot feel threatened by the presence of Indian troops in north or west Afghanistan.

India could begin by inducting an infantry brigade group to begin with and gradually step up the force level when a fully functional logistics system is in place – either from the south through Chabahar port (Iran)-Zaranj-Delaram-Garland Highway or from the north through Turkmenistan or Uzbekistan. Both the routes will present formidable challenges for logistics, but none that cannot be overcome with methodical planning. At the very least, due to the Indian Army's immense experience in counter-insurgency operations and cultural affinities that make it easier to train new Afghan recruits and officers, India could be invited to train ANA personnel in Afghanistan itself. Each training base established by India will require the presence of at least one infantry battalion so as to ensure the security of the instructors and trainees, the barracks, the training facilities and the outer perimeter. Limited amount of area domination would also be necessary to deter Taliban strikes from stand-off range. Road opening techniques practised by the Indian Army in Jammu and Kashmir and in the northeastern states and convoy protection drills will have to be strictly observed.

There is always an element of risk in undertaking military ventures. Indian Army infantry battalions have enormous experience in counter-insurgency operations and will give a creditable account of themselves if attacked by the Taliban. However, this is a foreign policy objective in which the overall gains far outweigh the military risks and India must not hesitate to join a multinational force under the UN flag in Afghanistan, if invited. While the idea of military intervention does not enjoy broad-based political support at present, it is unlikely that the political parties will demur when they see the security situation deteriorating after the departure of NATO-ISAF troops.