

Afghanistan on the Brink: Alternative Futures

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The article is a comprehensive analysis on the domestic as well as regional status of Afghanistan after the impending US withdrawal of troops in the next two years. The analysis is built on various possible scenarios which may change a political course in the country and how the regional powers play their parts in stabilising Afghanistan. The article discusses the ground situation in Afghanistan – how the ISAF and ANA (Afghan National Army) are coordinating in counter-insurgency operations and how far the ANA is prepared to tackle the situation after withdrawal of US troops. The major issue discussed is the resurgence of Taliban as it is still not defeated. The other major concern is Pakistan's growing salience and posturing for strategic depth. What would be the Pakistan's role in stabilising Afghanistan where it has to tackle the Afghan Taliban as it battles Tehreek-i- Taliban Pakistan (TTP) at home? The article also discusses the role of regional powers after US withdrawal and analyse various outcomes that may lead to maintenance of status-quo.

INTRODUCTION

In the midst of President Obama's announcement to drawdown 33,000 US troops from Afghanistan over the next two years, the scenario in Afghanistan remains mired by contradictions and political gamesmanship. There is little improvement in the security situation, even as the Taliban has upped the ante despite the US and ISAF forces being able to enhance their operational space through tactical victories. In so far as Afghanistan's domestic situation is concerned, it has been through somewhat flawed presidential and parliamentary elections, but what is important is that

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people continue to repose faith in democracy and what can be seen is the rooting of the idea of freedom, democracy and free society despite corruption or poor delivery of governance in parts where the writ of the Afghanistan government runs.

There are in fact two groups in Afghanistan; one seeking freedom and democracy and above all release from the tribal system to don the mantle of dynamic modern state responsible for its own destiny; the other are tribal leaders, Maliks and Jagirdars, rooted to the past who are loathe to losing control over the masses and are able to preserve their foot soldiers only through dole and coercion. The ideological construct appears to be giving way to fight for survival by these tribal leaders. It is in the above scenario that attempts at reconciliation and reintegration of disgruntled cadres begin to make sense.

2011 could be described as the year of multiple initiatives at peace-making in and for Afghanistan, with multiple actors seeking to seize the initiative. This has been primarily motivated by the clock of ISAF engagement beginning to tick, given the growing public pressure back home. Even as the counter-insurgency operations continue unabated and, according to senior Afghan officials and observers, make credible gains, the Afghan government appears to have given full fillip to reconciliation strategy over the year, and appears to be concentrated on two processes – with the Afghan Taliban and other armed groups inside the country, and with Pakistan and to a lesser extent Iran on the cross-border insurgency. Ideally the two tracks should be in parallel and in tandem, but they do not as yet appear to be so.

Within Pakistan, there is a general support for the Afghan reintegration policy, but no consensus on the reconciliation policy that is being pursued by the Afghanistan Government. Indeed, the whole notion of reintegration and reconciliation appears to have polarised both state and the society. Some Pakistani political leaders and many amongst policy analysts and civil society argue that distinctions between Afghan, Pakistani and Punjabi Taliban cannot be made because their relations are fluid. They state, further, that it is the Taliban ideology that must be defeated. These views are deeply opposed by many in the military and polity, especially the religious parties.

This inevitable polarisation has intensified after Osama Bin Laden's death following the American raid on his hideout in the military cantonment of Abbotabad. A spate of violence unleashed after his death by militants,

including attacks on the Pakistani military establishment like the PNS Mehran has resulted in political and civil society leaders taking strong positions, even at the risk of their own lives in a worsening security situation. There have been more casualties from terrorist attacks in Pakistan in 2010-11 than in Afghanistan. The fact that these are domestic rather than cross-border is cold comfort, but it also acts as a brutal reminder of the policy challenges in Pakistan.

Within the above backdrop in effect, Afghanistan is faced with trying to work on two discrete peace-making fronts: inside Afghanistan and between Afghanistan and Pakistan. While most analysts would agree that there is a better chance of success on each front if they can be separated, the two overlap, as they naturally must consider the Pashtun population in both the countries. Natural as the overlap is, it raises threat perceptions amongst the other communities in Afghanistan, and creates a security dilemma that can only be addressed through bridge-building.

EVOLVING CONTOURS OF THE SITUATION IN AFGHANISTAN

The period between now and 2014 will be critical for the stability of Afghanistan. Given the current nature of reconciliation and reintegration efforts, Afghanistan is likely to remain unstable in the near to medium term, even as efforts are made by competing interests to bring about rapprochement.

In terms of the ground situation, by all indications as mentioned earlier, the surge appears to be working, with ISAF and Afghan forces in joint operations widening their control to the countryside both in Kandhar and Helmand provinces as also in the northeast. Nonetheless, despite tactical victories, the 'clear-hold-build' policy of protecting population centres can be said to be at best partially successful, seen from the spate of deadly suicide bombing attacks on Afghan Security forces, ISAF and even soft targets like marriage processions and schools.

The scenario is further exacerbated by open borders, local support for the Taliban for a variety of reasons and open collaboration between the Afghan Taliban, TTP and Al Qaeda. These factors will, in the interim, most likely derail efforts at reconciliation and reintegration, as a consequence of which sustainable stability in East and Southern Afghanistan appears distant.

As the current state of affairs moves closer to the 2012 US presidential elections, it will create a basic military dilemma for the United States with regard to the strategies to be pursued in Afghanistan, viz. counter-insurgency (CI) or counter terrorism (CT). As per inputs this authors has received from Afghanistan and through discussions with US academics and others, the Pentagon is keen to pursue a CI strategy in the backdrop of recent successes and greater participation of the Afghan National Army (ANA). This thinking is also being shaped by the perspective that US forces cannot simply quit and run. On the other hand, growing political costs of a 'going nowhere' campaign in the minds of the State Department and political leaderships of NATO mean that CT, focused on Al Qaida and backed by some sort of deal with the Taliban, is a far better strategy that will bring closure to the strategic albatross. Be that as it may, the US President's announcement of drawdown is a clear indication of the victory of the CT camp championed by the likes of the US Vice President over the Pentagon's CI strategy, for which there appear to be no takers.

Notwithstanding the strategy choice debate, there is universal acceptance that whatever be the choice, the US must maintain long term presence in the region for larger geopolitical factors, including Central Asia and developments in Pakistan, and the China factor. It is for this reason that the US is actively pursuing with the Afghan Government a status of forces agreement that will allow it to position forces in Afghanistan, a questionable enterprise from the regional perspective.

Then there is the question of defining 'success', which remains a nebulous concept at best. Would disrupting and dismantling the Al Qaeda in Afghanistan and Pakistan be adequate? Is it possible to do that without addressing the Taliban, given its organic links with Al Qaeda? Further, is the elimination of Al Qaeda which, according to many reports has not been very effective lately, the only parameter of success? A more limited approach is likely to impact negatively the goals of the overall strategy which lays stress on improving the Afghan government's capabilities for governance and sustained development, including accelerating the efforts for building Afghan security forces.

While debate on strategy continues, there are discernable efforts being made by the ISAF to render a northern distribution network more effective, which essentially means supporting and consolidating the remaining elements of the Northern Alliance and also evolving a working relationship with Russia, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, all dictated by a convergence of interests.

STATE OF GOVERNANCE

Although Afghanistan has come a long way from the Taliban-controlled regressive state, people's expectations having been aroused by the glitz of Kabul and other provincial capitals and the foreign workers who are demanding more facilities and better deliverables. On the other hand, endemic corruption is plaguing much of the government machinery, especially, the police and judiciary, both of which affect the everyday lives of ordinary citizens. This has undermined the credibility of the elected government and its ability to bring peace and stability. Thus, the success of the coalition forces' operations is closely linked to empowering local and district governments and providing Afghans with functional governance not only in the cities but also in the provinces and districts.

This can only happen if the writ of the Afghan government was to run across the country, which is clearly not the case. Flawed elections and dwindling credibility of President Hamid Karzai, who is seen to be making deals for personal survival, exacerbates the problem. Given the prevailing circumstances of governance and democratic dividend in the near term, there can at best be incremental progress with tenuous balance between stability and instability. The lack of political structures and institutions, sharpening ethnic divide and intangible peace dividends are stalling the peace and development process. Absence of political parties that could keep the government in check and put pressure on transparency is another factor for the governance deficit.

The fact that even after ten years, there are no political parties is a matter of concern, giving credibility to tribal and warlord culture. What is heartening, however, is that socioeconomic factors and development dividends are giving people hope and restraining them from joining the ranks of Taliban. The future of the next generation and increasing stakes in democracy and fruits of development are reasons for some optimism on Afghanistan.

UNDEFEATED TALIBAN

The Taliban can said to be in the phase of consolidation. While figures of their presence and control vary, the South and East remain strong bastions of Taliban resistance, where the movement literally runs a parallel government. Attacks throughout Afghanistan continue, with the use of Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDS), suicide bombings and hit-and-run tactics being the most favoured methods. IEDs alone have accounted for an astounding 75 per cent of the total US and NATO troop casualties,

while the use of urban guerrilla tactics remains the second biggest kill factor. Most of these attacks are directed against security forces.

Reasons for Taliban Resurgence

- (a) **Corruption:** As mentioned, endemic corruption is plaguing much of the government machinery, especially the police and judiciary. A degree of local support stems more out of the Taliban's ability to fill in the governance vacuum as opposed to ideological support for their cause.
- (b) **Growing civilian casualties as collateral damage** resulting from heavy use of kinetic power by ISAF. This has resulted in swelling the ranks of Taliban to avenge personal losses.
- (c) **Failure of Nation Building Efforts:** The international community has failed to deliver on its pledge of a better future for Afghans. An empirical indicator of this lack of commitment to 'nation building' is reflected in the paltry levels of per capita investment that stood at a mere US\$57. This figure appears even more dismal when compared to other major areas of US intervention, such as US\$100 in Bosnia or US\$679 in Kosovo. Moreover, even within the aid that did trickle in, some 86 per cent is estimated to be a 'phantom aid', spent on goods and services from the US as opposed to being spent on developing indigenous capacities. Not surprisingly this has led to an increasing sense of frustration.
- (d) There is a deepening nexus between narco-trafficking and the Taliban. It has provided a sound financial pillar for support of the insurgency, which is the strongest in the provinces where levels of drug cultivation are high. Drug trafficking has helped finance not just the arms purchases but also sustained swelling ranks of the Taliban militia who are paid a monthly salary ranging from US\$200 to \$300, a princely amount compared to the paltry US\$120-\$150 paid to an Afghan National Army (ANA) recruit. Moreover, with an estimated 14 million Afghans who are dependent on poppy cultivation with no viable alternatives, the international policy of zero tolerance towards poppy cultivation has only fuelled resentment.
- (e) The Taliban have fruitfully exploited the *Pushtunwali* code of honour, practiced amongst Pashtun tribes, to their advantage. The Taliban have in particular used the concept of *badla* or revenge to swell ranks of their foot soldiers, following large scale civilian deaths resulting from coalition forces' bombing campaigns. The concept of *Melmastia* or hospitality, which must be offered to all visitors, has immensely

facilitated the movement of the Taliban militia throughout the Pashtun belt with food and hospitality.

- (f) Misperception about Taliban Aims and Objectives: The insurgency has largely been perceived as a localised problem which could be solved by isolating local groups and defeating them. The fact that Taliban are focused on rebuilding an *Islamic Emirate* has not been fully appreciated. That the Taliban is capable of strategic planning and coordinated action to adapt to any moves or countermoves by coalition forces has often been overlooked. The Taliban have also exploited ethnic tensions and the rejection of foreign forces. As a result, they have consolidated a hold in the Pashtun dominated areas of South and East, by isolating the Coalition forces, marginalising the local Afghan administration, and establishing a parallel administration. In recent months, a more professional Taliban had succeeded in making significant inroads by recruiting from non-Pashtun communities.
- (g) The Taliban have the ability to mobilise large number of fighters through innovative use of field radios and cell phones. Using modern communication systems, they are able to coordinate complex attacks and are becoming more sophisticated in the use of IEDs. Their intelligence is good, providing advance knowledge of the moves of coalition forces.
- (h) The Taliban are also getting increasingly successful in the perception management through relatively sophisticated propaganda apparatus, employing radio, video, and night letters. They are exploiting websites to chronicle the advance of the jihad. The propaganda is invariably built around widely perceived corruption in the Afghan government, lack of basic services and reconstruction, and collateral damage through wanton coalition attacks.
- (i) The Taliban are also effectively exploiting the open Afghan-Pakistan border and continue not only to maintain sanctuaries and bases in Pakistan's Tribal Areas but also dominate almost all major logistics routes coming into Afghanistan. As a result, the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), especially North and South Waziristan, remains largely impenetrable, allowing Taliban a measure of strategic depth in terms of the sanctuaries.

The reason of above elaborated analysis of Taliban resurgence is to highlight their operational efficiency, effective command and control, and ability to counter both strike and psychological power of the ISAF. What

this implies is that unless the Taliban are denied launch bases and local support through focussed and sustained application of military power, area domination and good governance, coalition forces are unlikely to stem the tide of their resurgence and growing influence. The Taliban can thus be expected to continue their policy of selective engagements and attacks to undermine attempts at stabilisation.

AFGHAN SECURITY FORCES (ASF)

Multi-ethnic Afghan Security Forces remain an important factor in the future security and political stability of Afghanistan. Although they have taken giant strides in training, equipment and operations, the ASF remain tactical players capable of undertaking only company, and in exceptional cases, battalion-sized operations. What is important is that in the absence of heavy support weapons and air power, they will need US and coalition forces' support. It will take anything from another five to ten years for this force to become a regular army. This means sustaining yearly budgets of \$3-5 billion over the next decade and half. Where is this money going to come from?

The current projected strength for the Afghan National Army (ANA), by December 2011, is 134,000. But Afghan officers say they're planning for a force of 200,000, while the Western press often cites 240,000 as the final figure. The number 400,000 is mentioned as the combined strength of the security forces – an army of 240,000 soldiers and a police force with 160,000 men. Under the circumstances, it remains questionable whether the ANA and ANP that constitute ASF would be able to fill the force ratio gap in order to create a winning CI strategy for the ISAF.

The second and more important perspective linked to the Afghan future is the political space that this Army is likely to create in a future scenario. Presently, it is closely linked to coalition forces, as they are providing funding and training support. After US withdrawal, such support would end, creating a question mark about the ASF's future. On the other hand, a strong and well trained apolitical ANA loyal to the government of the day will be an important factor in the future stabilisation scenario for Afghanistan. Thus, loyalty and political leanings of this multi-ethnic Afghan Army must not be undermined by the reconciliation process. An issue that will require constant watch will be the political leanings and cohesion of the ANA's command element.

PAKISTAN: GROWING SALIENCE AND POSTURING FOR STRATEGIC DEPTH

The salience of Pakistan in resolution of the Afghan imbroglio can be gauged by the fact that America has accepted Pakistan as a power-broker as was evident from Richard Holbrooke's statement on a visit to Kabul in mid-February, 2010. He opined, "*Pakistan's ISI can play a role in negotiations and I support that role...Pakistan has an influence in this area and has a legitimate security interest.*"¹

What is important and cannot be overlooked is the fact that despite the post-Osama turbulence in relationship and fissures in ties with the Pakistani military, America continues to look upon Pakistan as an important link in the Afghan reintegration process, given its influence over Afghan Taliban.

Current discourse within the Pakistani establishment seems to indicate that there are question marks being raised over the role Pakistan should play in both the reintegration process and after the US withdrawal. The fears are about the degree of influence that Pakistan actually exercises. Pakistani analyst Aamir Qureshi argues that the "Afghan Taliban has fragmented and become extremely complex over the past decade, while jihadist actors have become much more independent of the Pakistanis". The Pakistani military is becoming circumspect of its influence over the Taliban and is reportedly engaged in internal discussions on the issue of its ability to control militant groups during and after the drawdown. Another concern is whether it is in Islamabad's interest to rely on such untrustworthy forces, especially as their ideological leanings have been influenced by transnational jihad.

A great deal of the effort of the Pakistani military has been consumed in dealing with attacks by a resurgent Taliban and penetration of its own security system. It is for this reason that despite successes gained in operations against TTP in Swat and South Waziristan, as well as US pressure, the Pakistani Army is not keen on expanding its counterinsurgency campaign to North Waziristan any time soon.

The Pakistani dilemma in the prevailing circumstances is how much to support the failing US war in Afghanistan and its impact on an already growing backlash within the Pakistani heartland. The lurking fear in Pakistan is that the plot in Af-Pak could get out of control, drawing it into major commitment, and opening wounds of ethnic fault lines. This is

1 Lyse Doucet, "Pakistan's Push for a New role in Afghanistan", BBC News, February 19, 2010, available at http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/mobile/south_asia/8521823.stm

preventing full cooperation and forcing the military to cut deals that will allow it some influence over the Afghan Taliban as it battles the TTP at home.

It would thus be apparent that the Western coalition, focused on immediate interests, has allowed Pakistan to shape the future discourse in Afghanistan, something it may not be able to deliver upon. This does not augur well for strategic stability in the region and may end up undermining all that has been achieved in nearly a decade of struggle against terrorism. It is hardly important whether the policy of divide and rule now being attempted by NATO will work. What is important from Indian perspective is that despite having an excellent relationship with the Afghan government and undertaking sterling development projects, New Delhi is being sidelined.

ROLE OF REGIONAL ACTORS

Emerging trends indicate that despite declarations of involving regional stakeholders as one of the planks of the US Af-Pak strategy, nothing very much has been done by the US to move towards this goal. General David Petraeus, the former commander of US Central Command and present CIA chief, has stated that those seeking to help Afghanistan and Pakistan need to widen the aperture even farther to encompass at least the Central Asian states, India, Iran and even Russia and China.² Despite these observations, the formation of a regional Contact Group has not materialised.

Cooperation with Iran remains stymied because of its nuclear ambitions and the American claims that it is following a dual track approach. Iran would not like to see a Taliban Sunni government in place in Kabul, but it also prefers an early departure of Americans from Afghanistan. There was a time when the route from Chabahar port to Afghanistan was under consideration as an alternative logistics supply route for coalition forces, but the emerging internal and external dynamics in the region have prevented that option to be exercised. Despite the increasing relevance of the Northern Distribution Network, less than 20 per cent of supplies for ISAF are sourced from this route. Attempts by the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) to have a word on Afghanistan are not viewed positively by the US and its NATO allies.

China is comfortable in dealing with Afghanistan from a distance, even while it is concerned with the likely negative fallout of radicalism

2 General David Petraeus, Interview, *Foreign Policy*, January-February 2009

and extremism spilling out and affecting its Muslim majority region of Xinjiang. On balance, it would tend to continue endorsing Pakistan's policies in Afghanistan with an understanding that Pakistan would protect its interests even when the coalition troops pull out. During Karzai's visit to China in March, 2010, Beijing chose to focus on increased economic investments and support to Afghanistan and only very limited help in the shape of training Afghan military personnel in China.

The US has increasingly become receptive to Pakistan's refrain of reducing the Indian footprint as a quid pro quo for the former's cooperation. General Stanley McChrystal was one of the forerunners in articulating this when he pointed out that India's improved signature, even in the developmental field, was a cause for Pakistan to take counteraction. Thus he showed an implicit understanding that India's pursuance of interests and expansion of role beyond the developmental activities (worth nearly \$2 billion) will be counterproductive to the overall effort as it will undermine Pakistani assistance, which is considered vital. The harsh reality is that Pakistan is becoming a central player to the exclusion of other regional actors. This trend is unlikely to lead to a peaceful and stable Afghanistan.

DILEMMAS FACED BY THE MAIN ACTORS

A. United States: Geopolitical Compulsions

The burden of Af-Pak is increasing political and the economic costs in an essentially failing enterprise which is sapping the will and morale of the American leadership. For the US, pull out is not an easy option without creating conditions that are looked upon by the world as a semblance of victory. As a result, in the period leading up to a final withdrawal, the US will look for a number of operational victories, which essentially means significant control over southern and eastern Afghanistan, effectively blocking entry routes from FATA, and inducing sustained support from increasingly radicalised Pakistan. In addition it has to weigh consequences of loss of strategic space in Afghanistan, given its linkages to Central, East and West Asia. Incrementally, a situation is emerging *wherein the US will need to take support of regional actors, including Russia*. However, intransigence over Iran will remain a dilemma.

The US' strategy will have to undergo shifts as follows:

- It will need to take a call on optimum strategic approach. This entails resolving the dilemma between the preferred CT strategy of civilian leaders aimed at targeting at Al Qaida, accommodation of moderate Taliban, and gradual pull out. The US military, hurt by reverses in Iraq and the stigma of Vietnam, is expected to labour upon CI strategy as a winning and doable option while continuing with the drawdown process. Given the aforementioned perspective, the debate over what course to adopt and the end state i.e. to remain engaged and on what terms is likely to persist.
- In case perceptions point toward *possible mission collapse*, the political and military assessment on timing of withdrawal, together with the implications for the Taliban's victory and its consequential global effects on War on Terror, will be critical.
- There will be an impact of the pull out on Washington's 'Greater Central Asia' policy and energy interests, particularly in the context of growing Chinese influence. The main issue will be whether a favourable regional architecture that compliments American interest can be woven?
- The lack of cushion of time could result in discarding restraint, upping the ante of operations against Taliban and Pakistan, which could create a serious situation with the potential of destabilising the entire region.
- Developments in Pakistan are inextricably linked to the decision dilemma. The Taliban will never be beaten or brought to negotiating table as long as the Af-Pak border is not sealed. Growing Chinese assertiveness and the Sino-Pakistani nexus could have detrimental impact on the region. The situation is further complicated with ISAF laying down time lines for pull out. The role of regional players would become increasingly salient under these circumstances.

B. Pakistan and Imperatives of its Afghan Policy

The major decision dilemma faced by Pakistan relates to a post-withdrawal scenario. It includes the following variables:

- Consequences of a US withdrawal and Taliban victory: What does the rise of fundamentalist forces and growing radicalism that accompany it mean for the internal cohesion and security of Pakistan?

- Can a resurgent Taliban backed by extremist ideology be contained, particularly in the event of partial success or failure of military operations in FATA? What are the consequences of failure for Pakistan as a polity?
- There will be serious implications of the breach of the buffer zone east of the Indus by fundamentalists and their entry into the Pakistani heartland (as is evident through a series of high profile attacks in Lahore, Islamabad and Karachi). Can such a scenario become the foundation for the possible balkanisation of the Pakistani state?
- There is a possibility of a clash between radical forces and moderates in civil society, particularly in the context of a deteriorating internal situation marked by continued acts of terrorism and declining economy. Recent civil society attacks questioning the army's loyalty, patriotism and national interest are noteworthy. Criticism of the Pakistani Army of peddling influence without responsibility is significant.
- Can China be the strategic crutch against US domination? Pakistan has to calculate costs and benefits of open collusion with China at the cost of its relationship with the US. What will be the impact of such developments on Pakistan's bargaining power with India?
- Last and even more importantly, what are the implications of the above outlined internal developments on the security of Pakistan's nuclear weapons?

C. Afghanistan's Dilemmas

In the run up to 2014, Afghanistan faces a number of decision dilemmas. They include the following:

- What is the ability of the Afghan Security Forces after US withdrawal to withstand Taliban attempts to capture power? What will be the effective *modus vivendi*, where coalition forces provide close combat support and mentoring, while the ANA undertakes CI operations?
- Has Afghan civil society developed adequate stakes in peace and development to challenge the Taliban? What are the terms of reconciliation acceptable both politically and in broader social terms? Basically, is the new Afghanistan willing to compromise with tribal culture? If so on what terms?

- What is the capability of northern warlords supported by Russia and Central Asian countries to mount a challenge to the Taliban and what would be the likely consequences of such a standoff? Similarly, can the current two-tier dialogue process bring accommodation between Taliban and existing political forces?
- There will also be longer-term issues relating to the perception of strategic depth for Pakistan and the implications of making the Durand Line the international border.

D. India's Dilemmas

From an Indian perspective, developments in Afghanistan entail imponderables such as:

- If the Taliban stages a comeback to power, what will be the consequences of a re-radicalised Afghanistan for India and regional security?
- How can India deal with a scenario wherein Pakistan cannot be a buffer state against the advancing tide of Islamic fundamentalism worldwide?
- At what stage will Indian national interest dictate more active (even military) involvement in Afghanistan?
- Can India take a lead in formulating or putting together a regional response to deal with the post-US/ISAF scenario?

AFGHANISTAN'S ALTERNATIVE FUTURES

The foregoing discourse vividly highlights that the most important driver of Afghanistan's future is the manner in which the Af-Pak strategy shapes on the ground and how various actors relate to the decision dilemmas outlined thus far. The implementation of the current Af-Pak strategy or the nuanced changes that are brought about in the run-up to 2014 will depend upon its implementation on the ground, which itself is bedevilled by many factors of friction. There are too many moving parts in the shape of actors with competing interests, including allies and adversaries that militate against execution of the articulated strategy.

Critical uncertainties include the degree of success achieved by the US in its goals after defining its Af-Pak strategy objectives clearly, and the ability of the Taliban to sustain offensives against the coalition forces, which would in turn be determined by Pakistan's attitude and military success in its FATA region.

A long-term commitment of the US to ‘invest and endure’ rather than looking for an early exit; improved governance; strengthening of the ANA and ANP; increased engagement of regional actors; additional contributions by NATO/ISAF/international community; and bringing Pakistan in line with the US and its allies goals in Afghanistan rather than allowing it to shape the discourse would be the key elements of success.

Three alternative futures can be visualised for Afghanistan in light of the in-depth complexity of factors outlined in this article.

A. De facto Balkanisation

- ISAF and US forces begin to concentrate in bringing stability to Northern and Western Afghanistan, while simultaneously pursuing reconciliation efforts to bring moderate Taliban on board.
- This strategy results in a ‘push’ factor, which forces cross-border movement of the Taliban to take shelter in relatively secure FATA, resulting in large scale refugee movement to Pakistan. The whole idea is to create what can be termed as a “Pashtun phenomenon”, aimed at pressurising Pakistan to act or face consequences.
- To deal with inevitable retaliation, the coalition and ASF bolster areas around Kabul, while the Afghan government becomes more responsive and transparent. A concerted effort is made at delivering governance benefits.
- ANA acts as a lead player in CI operations, supported by ISAF. Increasingly, Afghans become stakeholders in their own security and governance.
- Calibrated cross border strikes by coalition forces could pressurise the Pakistan military to undertake proactive operations in North and South Waziristan for fear of blowback effect from the TTP.
- As military operations on both sides of Durand divide meet success, Taliban resistance begins to reduce, making them amenable to peace overtures.

B. Pakistan-Brokered Peace

- Pakistan, as a ‘means toward an end theory’, manages to position a friendly pro-Taliban dispensation in Kabul. Islamabad will control access to Central Asia, payoffs of which are greater economic integration in terms of allowing development of the Turkmenistan-

Afghanistan-Pakistan-India pipeline and of the Mekran Coast as an industrial-cum-strategic hub. Connectivity makes it a cost effective option for China.

- However, it would be naïve to expect Afghans to allow uncontested strategic depth to Pakistan. An adverse consequence of such a scenario will be much sharpened standoff between the Pakistani military and the ANA. It is here that the importance of a well-trained and apolitical ANA becomes critical for the stability of Afghanistan.
- The new dispensation brings the region more under the influence of political Islam, with all its attendant ramifications. An important side-effect will be that any faltering by Pakistan in calibrating its response to the Taliban may well result in an Islamist inferno within Afghanistan, with flames engulfing Pakistan as well.

C. Regional Settlement

- India and other regional stakeholders become concerned with the re-emergence of Pakistan as the fulcrum for deciding Afghan destiny. To prevent such a scenario from emerging, India will reach out to the second generation Pashtun leadership and former Northern Alliance (NA) leadership, with tacit backing of the Karzai government and the support of the US and Russia.
- Revival of the NA appears on cards and both Iran and Central Asia see in this an opportunity to make common cause in the stability of Afghanistan.
- China too acquiesces in a regional solution to protect its investments and agrees along with Iran and India to invest in the stability of Afghanistan. As a sop, Chabahar can be offered as an alternative trade and pipeline route to Central Asia.

CONCLUSION

Afghanistan's future remains largely dependent on US strategies, developments in Pakistan and the manner in which reconciliation between moderates and radicals is structured. By laying down the timeline for drawdown of forces, the Obama administration has engendered dynamics with every competitor attempting to claim his own strategic space. The Pakistani military establishment is convinced that Western forces lack commitment and resolve for a sustained fight and is waiting to reclaim its

strategic depth in Afghanistan after their eventual withdrawal, which could be sooner than later.

Over-reliance on Pakistan to pull the US and NATO's chestnuts out of the Afghan fire has resulted in the Americans throwing good money after the money gone bad in terms of military and other aid given to Pakistan. Further, Pakistan itself is reeling under multiple terror attacks as a blowback from its failed policies of supporting jihadi terror groups. While the Pakistani establishment thinks that it can control Taliban after the departure of the Western coalition, the Taliban is more likely to act autonomously, throwing more challenges to Pakistan, the region itself and the international community.

It is time for India to consider options other than the only soft option of development assistance to Afghanistan. Regional consensus with Iran, Russia, talking to China, as well as opening back channels to Pakistan and establishing contacts with important domestic players in Afghanistan are imperative. India should also become proactive in defining its core strategic interest in Afghanistan i.e. that it should never be allowed to become a haven of terrorists which would embark on a regional or global jihad.