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Evolving Situation in Afghanistan: Pakistan's Challenges and Options

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Introduction

For decades, Afghanistan has been at the forefront of Pakistan's foreign policy and internal security. Owing to geography, people-to-people linkages, tribal affiliations, and the political economy of the border regions, Pakistan cannot remain insulated from the rapidly changing situation in Afghanistan. Among the regional states, Pakistan has high stakes in peace, stability, and security in Afghanistan. Peace or conflict in Afghanistan directly affects Pakistan's foreign policy and national security. Similarly, the choices Pakistan makes impact the internal and external dynamics of Afghanistan.

Now as the United States (US) and international forces are withdrawing after two long decades, Pakistan is faced with a new challenge of responding to the evolving situation. Islamabad is keeping a close eye on developments on the ground where violence has sharply risen with a corresponding stalemate in intra-Afghan talks in Doha, moves being made by the regional states, besides tracking contours of likely US policy towards Afghanistan and the region after complete withdrawal. Meanwhile, fears of violence spilling over into Pakistan and a prospect of refugee influx from Afghanistan continue to complicate the already complex situation. This article explores these issues and analyses possible scenarios that can emerge in Afghanistan in the short term.

Present Ground Situation and Likely Scenarios:

The Biden administration, on April 14, 2021, announced to complete a full withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan by September 11, 2021. Meanwhile, the Department of Defense indicated that most of the US forces will return by July 4, 2021. This accelerated the timeline and pace of US exit from Afghanistan, consequently, leading to a rapid change in the ground situation. Fighting between the Taliban and the Afghan national army intensified. From the first week of May till the end of June, nearly 50 districts fell to the Afghan Taliban, while Taliban forces were laying siege to major urban centers. Meanwhile, prospects of the peace process being successful are bleak. In this situation, US President Joe Biden invited Afghan leaders, President Ashraf Ghani and Dr. Abdullah Abdullah, to Washington.

Regional countries, in view of the evolving situation, are positioning themselves to deal with the fallout of violence. From here onwards, the situation in Afghanistan can evolve in the following four ways:

- 1) **Status-Quo:** Kabul government and the Afghan Taliban continue talks for exploring a peace agreement and outlining contours of power-sharing arrangement. Meanwhile, low-key fighting continues between the two sides.. Government forces continue to enjoy the support of U.S. airpower while regional states support peace efforts.

- 2) **Reconciliation happens:** Talks between the Taliban and Kabul are productive. A power-sharing arrangement is concluded. New elections are held with the participation of the Taliban leading to the formation of a new government involving Taliban members. Efforts are made to integrate the Taliban into the Afghan army and Afghanistan gradually begins its march towards long-term peace and stability. Regional states support the reconciliation process.
- 3) **Civil War ensues:** Talks in Doha breakdown. The Taliban determine that the only solution is complete military victory and move towards capturing the remaining territory. In response, local militias and groups emerge and civil war escalates forcing ordinary people to flee Afghanistan towards Pakistan and Iran. Like the 1990s, regional states will extend support to different rivals leading to protracted civil conflict.
- 4) **First Violence then Talks:** It is more than likely that after complete U.S military withdrawal, violence levels will increase initially. Taliban are likely to lay siege on key urban centers and attempt to take over few districts. This will lead to pushback from other political groups and militias on the ground. In the face of international condemnation, the Taliban will attempt to reduce violence levels and make efforts for forming an inclusive government with representation from all ethnic and tribal groups. Regional states will seek to influence this process leading to low-level instability.

It is now a well-established fact that Afghanistan has become a safe haven for nearly 20 militant/terrorist organizations with regional ambitions. These include Al-Qaida, ISIS, ETIM, IMU, TTP, JeM, LeT, SSP among others. These organizations have some presence in Afghanistan and are eagerly waiting for a complete withdrawal of international forces to accelerate their activities. Pakistan being Afghanistan's immediate neighbor is likely to be most affected by the violent actions of these organizations.

The international community, especially, Western countries would have the luxury of closing down even their diplomatic presence and departing. For instance, Australia has announced shutting down its embassy. The US, meanwhile, will be stationing nearly 650 troops to protect its embassy premises in Kabul. Washington, however, is making sure that Kabul airport remains secure for emergency exit if need be. It is more than likely that other Western powers such as

Germany, the UK, France, Spain, and Italy, among others, will close down their diplomatic posts as the ground situation further worsens. Neighbours of Afghanistan, especially Pakistan, cannot detach from the evolving situation in Afghanistan. Islamabad, therefore, is constrained to focus intensively on the changing ground situation and its impact on the Afghan-Pakistan border, besides preparing to deal with a possible influx of refugees. It is estimated that 0.5 million – 0.7 million new refugees could reach Pakistan, which is already hosting nearly 3 million Afghan refugees.

Challenges for Pakistan:

Pakistan's current outlook towards Afghanistan is driven by changing balance of forces on the ground, political process, role of regional states, evolving US policy, and concern about the influx of refugees and its management. Pakistan's challenge is to figure out its response while insulating itself from the fallout of increased violence and instability in Afghanistan. It is a tall order for a country which has been blamed for unnecessary meddling in Afghan affairs for decades. But can it stay aloof? Does it have the luxury of not doing anything? Even if Pakistan chooses not to make any move, it will have to respond to changing situation, which in turn will have inevitable consequences.

In this background following challenges are top-most for Pakistan:

A) Future US role in Afghanistan?

As the US is withdrawing its military forces, Pakistan is seeking to figure out America's post-withdrawal role. In recent months, the Biden administration has indicated that it seeks to (i) pull US forces out swiftly and safely; (ii) establish over-the-horizon counter-terrorism posture/capabilities in the region; (iii) deter Afghan Taliban from the military takeover of Kabul; (iv) revive Doha peace talks and (v) support Afghan republic. White House and State Department have led diplomatic efforts to support these goals, but their results have been wanting. So far, Washington has been successful in ensuring the security of US military personnel in Afghanistan, despite a delay of US departure from the May 1 deadline. As for the rest, outcomes have been far from desirable. Taliban continue their military offensive while intra-Afghan talks remain deadlocked, and regional coordination to bring meaningful pressure on the Taliban is far from materializing, while the state of the Afghan republic is increasingly under stress.

Amid these, Pakistan which for years advocated 'responsible withdrawal' of US from Afghanistan, now faces prospects of dealing with an uncertain situation after completion of the withdrawal. Pakistan's National Security Advisor, Dr. Moeed Yusuf recently stated that Washington neither took Pakistan into

confidence on the expedited withdrawal from Afghanistan nor shared post-withdrawal plans. This means that Pakistan is not sure about the contours of US policy in the short-to-medium term.

B) Over-the Horizon CT Capabilities and Pakistan

In recent weeks, reports in Pakistani and American media have suggested that Pentagon is discussing with Pakistan and other regional countries the contours of an “over the horizon” counter-terrorism capability that would enable US forces to respond to terrorist threats emanating from Afghanistan after completion of the withdrawal. Jake Sullivan, US National Security Advisor, has confirmed that Washington was holding such discussions through military, intelligence, and diplomatic channels. Ostensibly, these discussions are focusing on the deployment part of US capabilities, such as armed drones, on Pakistani territory. Prime Minister Imran Khan has confirmed that Washington did make a pitch for such a facility and the Pakistani government has turned down the US request.

Even if, Biden administration is able to negotiate such covert arrangements with Pakistan and Central Asian states, such as Uzbekistan, the next question would be: for how long can these facilities be sustained? From the US perspective, if the Pentagon becomes dependent on one or more countries, including Pakistan, for such counter-terrorism operations, then Washington will find it difficult to bring additional pressure on them for supporting peace and stability in Afghanistan. Conversely, there is an incentive for Pakistan to arrive at an understanding with the US on its future role.

C) Future of Peace Process after withdrawal

The political crisis in Afghanistan has deepened and the Doha process has become dormant. The prospects of an intra-Afghan agreement on power-sharing are, therefore, bleak. While the Biden administration invited President Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah to Washington and signaled support for them, it is unclear what concessions they are ready to make for an inclusive political system. When US forces were present in Afghanistan, Washington could leverage pressure on Afghan leaders to address the political crisis and conclude an agreement with the Taliban based in Doha. Now with the departure of US forces, American influence on leaders of the Kabul government stands diminished.

Similarly, Taliban have not shown inclination on reaching an agreement with Kabul government. Meanwhile, the ability of regional states to convince the Taliban has also reduced following the departure of US forces. It appears that a power-sharing arrangement will not materialize leading to more violence in the short run. And consequently, the Doha process underway for the past three years will remain moribund. Incentives for every side (Kabul government, Taliban, and the US) to talk or push for talks (for regional states) have reduced considerably with expedited withdrawal by the US.

D) Resurgence of TTP: Reverse sanctuary problem

In recent months Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) has shown a sort of revival of its activities in Pakistan. For over a decade, TTP was a potent and deadly terrorist group that wreaked havoc across Pakistan but was eventually degraded through military firepower in counter-terrorism operations. But the terrorist group's fighters fleeing operations in Pakistan found a safe presence on Afghan territory enabling them to regroup and restart their activities.

As violence intensifies and civil war ensues, TTP would have relatively greater freedom of action inside Afghanistan to plan and carry out attacks inside Pakistan. Islamabad, thus, would have to enhance its border security measures and put security apparatus on a state of higher alert to respond to the uptick in TTP activities.

Meanwhile, there is also a possibility of TTP reconnecting with the Afghan Taliban in the future. They have an ideological connection and have remained partners in the past. Therefore, a takeover of Kabul by the Afghan Taliban could present a nightmare for Pakistani security forces in two ways – the Afghan Taliban possibly giving protection and sanctuaries to TTP, and the Afghan Taliban's victory serving as a morale booster for TTP's support base and cadre within Pakistan.

E) Managing Refugee Influx

It is near certainty that with the intensification of violence across Afghanistan, civilians will flee for safety to Pakistan and Iran. Since 2017, Pakistan has been working to fence the border with Afghanistan and 90 percent of fencing has been completed so far. Faced with waves of refugees Pakistan will be constrained to open the border in the face of international pressure. Though, for now, Prime Minister Imran Khan has vowed to close the border, but when refugees will be waiting on the border, Islamabad will be forced to open it. These new waves would also bring new militants into Pakistan, thus exacerbating security challenges.

Like the 1980s, Pakistan will have two options to deal with refugees:

- a) allow Afghan refugees to move inland and settle wherever they find support from local communities. For this Pakistan would have to engage international humanitarian organizations early on for providing emergency relief and assistance.
- b) Restrict Afghan refugees to their camps and provide them necessary facilities in those camps with the support of humanitarian organizations. This model was successfully adopted by Iran during the 1980s. Turkey also practiced a version of this model when it established safe zones on the border for Syrian refugees.

Policy Options

For Pakistan, policy options should start with:

- i) Review of the current situation.
- ii) Evolving a national policy through engagement with political parties, national security stakeholders, academics, think tanks, and religious leaders.
- iii) Consultations with regional powers, including Iran, China, Central Asian Republics, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and UAE, on the changing ground situation.
- iv) Enhanced coordination with the United Nations and international humanitarian organizations.
- v) Engagement with all Afghan factions to indicate that Pakistan is not supporting any one particular group/faction.
- vi) Engage Afghan Taliban through regional mechanisms as the Doha process is dormant.
- vii) Consultation and coordination with Kabul government to indicate Pakistan's support for peace and stability and also to manage an influx of refugees.

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