



US-Afghanistan Strategic Partnership Agreement: Assurances for Afghanistan?

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On May 1, 2012, President Obama paid a secret visit to Afghanistan to sign a strategic partnership agreement with Afghan President Hamid Karzai setting the terms for the departure of the US and NATO troops in 2014. The agreement came in the backdrop of strained relationship between the US and President Karzai. Incidents in the recent past, including the release of photos showing American soldiers posing with the remains of Taliban insurgents and killing of 16 civilians by an American soldier, have added ample unpleasantness in the US-Afghan relationship and infuriated President Karzai. President Obama in his speech acknowledged that “there will be difficult days ahead”¹ but, he said that, “We look forward to the future of peace.....we’re agreeing to be long-term partners in combating terrorism, and training Afghan security forces, strengthening democratic institutions and supporting development, and protecting human rights of all Afghans.”² Obama declared removal of another 23,000 troops by the end of this summer followed up by a gradual transition, and by the end of 2014 the “Afghans will be fully responsible for the security of their country”.

The strategic partnership agreement has many promises but little can be assured for Afghanistan, where many parts of the country remain extremely hard to manage. The Preamble of the agreement lays out : “Afghanistan and the United States go forward in this partnership with confidence because they are committed to seeking a future of justice, peace, security and opportunity for the Afghan people. ...The Parties reaffirm their strong commitment

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to sovereignty, independence, territorial integrity and national unity of Afghanistan.”³

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State of Pakistan

In August 2001, Pakistan stood as a nuclear power state, had just lost another war against India in Kargil in 1999, and another military coup under General Musharraf had taken place replacing

the corrupt democratic regime of Nawaz Sharif, who was blamed for nation’s economic woes which virtually brought Pakistan at the verge of economic collapse. 9/11 terrorist attacks was a blessing in disguise for Pakistan which pulled it out of the economic doldrums, once again, made it an ally of the west and also, brought in much desired economic and military aid boasting the defence modernisation.

After 11 years of war in the region, Pakistan is again on the political and

economic crossroads. Pakistan today, is perhaps at the worst stage of its destabilization since its inception. Alarming radicalisation, lowering GDP, rising inflation, exceeding anti-state and particularly anti-military sentiments, seem to have grappled the nation and the survival of the state is being questioned. US greatest success in the war on terror, killing Osama bin Laden within Pakistan military cantonment next to military academy has raised number of questions regarding not only the credibility of Pakistani leadership but also its future relationship with Washington which would further impact the stability quotient in Pakistan. The already complex problems in Pakistan have been compounded by the lowering US popularity in Pakistan, where not only the leadership, but particularly a common man blames the decade long US presence for much of its woes and also is apprehensive about western intentions to grab its nuclear weapons. The national interest of both Pakistan and the United States appear to be in perfect opposition but none of the two has overtly admitted this as they complement each others requirements right now. Presently, Pakistan is facing a broad mosaic of militancy. Vast variety of terrorist groups operate from Pakistan and share varied relationship with the state. Some of these the military is willing to target, some it was compelled to target, and, a few it wants to protect. For the first time the militancy has managed to penetrate in the interiors of Punjab and Sindh, and the Army GHQ became one of the terror targets in the recent past. The impact of Afghan War has allowed the al-Qaeda, Haqqani network and the Taliban inside Pakistan where they have been trying to expand their influence. Pakistan military and the ISI have nurtured some of the terrorist organisation which it categorically grades as their "strategic assets" and is clearly not willing to act against them. These so called "friendly"⁴ groups include - the Good Taliban, Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), Jamaat-ud-Dawa (JuD), and Jaish-e-Muhammad. The Haqqani network which has strongholds in the bordering Afghan districts of Paktia and Khost and is involved in the anti-U.S and anti-NATO operations has enjoyed the state patronage for long.⁵ The military has desisted from acting against these groups which been "selective and partial" in its counter-terrorism approach,

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and its long stated foreign policy based on terrorism has bounced back threatening the survival of state.

Continuing Instability in Afghanistan

Various reports and interviews present a grim picture of Afghan life after 11 years of war.⁶ Although, there are signs of progress for example the number of school going children has gone up and also girls are being enrolled into the education system which was previously banned by the Taliban, media is getting somewhat more freedom and around 10 television channels are in operation. Security and governance remain a challenge for Afghanistan. The number of attacks by Taliban and other insurgent groups have gone up and thus violence has gone up and corruption has grappled the Afghan society.⁷

Immediately after 2001, the US managed to wipe out the Taliban control from Afghanistan bringing some respite to the Afghans. But, in Spring 2003, the Taliban insurgency restarted with the ISI support which equipped them with money, arms and training. Musharraf continued to provide sanctuaries to Taliban, which became like a proverbial golden goose for the military, which it could continue to encash in return of continued American support in the future. In 2009, the country faced a full blown insurgency coupled with an extremely weak administration. The elections in 2009, where the turn out was just 38 per cent were rigged, and Karzai won his second term as President worsening the political crisis, which continues till date. Unequal distribution of seats among various ethnic groups, consistent corruption in administration, ethnic discrimination and prolong economic deprivation have aggravated long unresolved ethnic conflicts in Afghanistan. Although, Karzai does not accept corruption as the core issue in his governance, it clearly has its advantages for the Pashtun community, and has increased the divide between the Pashtuns and the non Pashtuns.⁸ The US has focused much more in the Pashtun areas and around 70 per cent of the development funds are being spent in the Pashtun dominated areas in South – Helmand and Kandahar.⁹

The Taliban returned back, al Qaeda is regenerated along the border patronising and financing multiple other terror outfits (including the TTP and the LeT), and drug production

is booming as few alternatives are available in the region for the livelihood. Killing of former President Burhanuddin Rabbani has suspended the peace talks with Taliban and has had direct implications on the full-scale insurgency. The US plans to prepare the Afghan Army and police to take charge of peace and security in Afghanistan after 2014, but this

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is a severe challenge not only because the forces lack the capability, but also, because there are decreasing number of Pashtun recruits in the Afghan army. Also, it is unfair to assume that Afghanistan will manage to finance its security forces after the US withdrawal. The US is expected to mobilise international commitments to fund the Afghan security forces for next ten years. It is estimated that an annual funding of approximately \$ 4 billion would be needed to fund the Afghan national armed forces.

Pakistan's desire for strategic depth and Regional interests

Throughout the last 11 years of war the US had a major difficulty identifying whether Pakistan was an ally in real terms or did it continue to cater to its own strategic objectives in Afghanistan. Although, the alliance under General Musharraf commenced with much praise for the Pakistan with billions of dollars pouring into Pakistan, by 2006-2007 the US apprehensions regarding Pakistan's loyalty in the war on terror started to build up before the Bush administration overtly accused Pakistan for misusing the US aid and also being partial and selective in their counter-terrorism approach.

The fact is that Pakistan remains wedded to the ideas of maintaining its strategic depth in Afghanistan and is deeply conscious of strengthening its footprints. Despite facing a jihadi blowback and the severe challenge to deal with the TTP, Pakistan continues to treat Taliban as its strategic assets and patronise the Taliban. For Pakistan, an extremist regime in Afghanistan would cater its strategic options against India much strongly as compared to a liberal Karzai regime which is supportive of Indian role in Afghanistan.

India has had a strong strategic interest in Afghanistan which obviously fall under its overall desire

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to protect its interests well beyond South Asia. India has been involved in rebuilding and development process in Afghanistan and its interest in the region are recognised and welcome globally except by Pakistan, which views India's role in Afghanistan as a strategic challenge.

Afghanistan is riddled with problems and uncertainties raising numerous questions regarding how would it shape up after the US withdrawal in 2014. It would not be incorrect to state that Afghanistan cannot develop into a state that would carry the western notions of stability and modernity, because of combination of myriad destabilizing factors. Only military means are not sufficient to win the war especially, if the occupying forces declare to withdraw in the middle of looming uncertainties about the future. There is an urgent need for the NATO allies to shift focus from security to development and equal distribution of development programmes, in order to pave the way for long term stability in Afghanistan, which would have varied regional implications. The divide between Pashtuns and non Pashtuns has further widened due to unequal distribution of development funds in Afghanistan.

The neighbouring actors India and Russia have a significant role to play in the shaping up the future of Afghanistan, especially after the US withdrawal. There are areas of mutual interest which can be addressed jointly, such as, terrorism, drug trafficking and energy resources. In the current complex situation Afghanistan needs cooperation from neighbouring countries and solution of the problem lies in a regional approach. Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) in fact, provides the best option as a platform for neighbouring member nations for strengthening the partnership with an objective

of bringing stability in Afghanistan. India has invested heavily in the reconstruction and stability in Afghanistan. For India, to continue its investments and involvement in the stability of Afghanistan, support for other major and regional powers becomes extremely critical.

Notes

1 "Remarks by President Obama and President Hamid Karzai of Aghanistan at Signing of strategic Partnership Agreement", at <http://historymusings.wordpress.com/2012/05/01/full-text-obama-presidency-may-1->

2 Ibid.

3 *Enduring Strategic Partnership Agreement Between The United States of America And the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan*, Text

4 Ayesha Siddiqua Agha, "Pakistan's Counterterrorism strategy: Separating Friends from Enemies", *The Washington Quarterly*, Winter 2011, pp.149-162.

5 Ibid.

6 "Afghanistan: After 10 years of war, life is grim for Afghans", *NYDailyNews.com, Daily News*, October 05, 2011, at http://articles.nydailnews.com/2011-10-05/news/30265141_1_ghulam-haider-hamidi-rangina-hamidi-afghans

7 Ibid.

8 Ahmed Rashid, *Pakistan on the Brink: The future of Pakistan, Afghanistan and the West*, (Penguin Books, England, 2012) , p. 86.

9. Ibid.



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