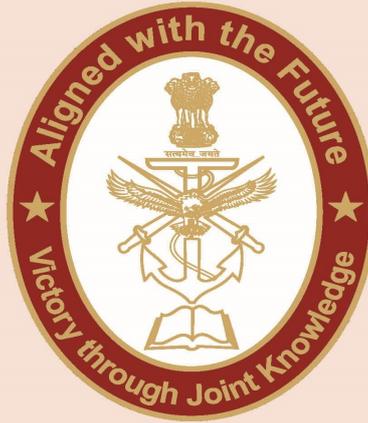


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LIKELY FUTURE SCENARIO'S IN AFGHANISTAN

BY

MAJ GEN HARSHA KAKAR (RETD)

There are regular reports of the US special envoy for Afghanistan, Zalmay Khalilzad, seeking the support of every country which has a stake in Afghanistan (less Iran), for pushing the Taliban for talks. He recently visited China and Pakistan for the same, while during a stop over in Delhi briefed the Indian government on his progress and plans. He has held multiple rounds of parleys with them in the Middle East and hopes to achieve a breakthrough.

In a statement over the weekend he stated, 'Meetings have been more productive than in the past. We have made significant progress on vital issues. We have number of issues left to work out. Nothing is agreed until everything is agreed'. Everything involves intra-Afghan dialogue and comprehensive ceasefire. There are also reports that there has been an agreement for withdrawal of American forces.

Pak claims they are pressurizing the Taliban into talks and have on occasions arrested few of their prominent members for short durations, seeking to push them into accepting US conditions. Surprisingly, the world ignores the fact that this is the same country with the same leadership, which only weeks ago had stated that there are no Taliban in the country, and it has no hold over them.

In his recent visit to Pak, US Senator Lindsey Graham stated that in return for Pak's assistance in ending the Afghan war, the US could offer a Free Trade Agreement. The same senator also urged President Trump to meet Imran Khan at the earliest. A further thaw in the relationship was evident when reports stated that the US air force has sent its fighter aircraft to participate in the Falcon Talon III joint exercise in Pak.

Recent inputs from Pak indicate that Mullah Baradar, a co-founder of the Taliban and a prisoner in Pak from 2010-2018 would shortly move to Qatar to head the Taliban delegation in the US-Taliban talks. His release was based on initial discussions between the Taliban and the US.

India is respected in Afghanistan, while Pakistan is not. Indian soft power, flowing from its historical links, Bollywood, contributions to development and support to its military, make it an effective player in the country. The Taliban are also aware of Indian support and assistance to the country. Pak on the other hand is considered, by the common Afghani, as a nation which is unwilling to let Afghanistan enjoy peace, development but remain dependent on it. For Pak a fractured Afghanistan is best suited, as it would remain under its control.

The development of the Chabahar port by India opens another avenue to Afghanistan for its imports and exports. Thus, any attempts at blockading Afghanistan by denying it the use of Karachi by Pakistan would be ineffective. This has also brought Iran and Afghanistan, including the Taliban, closer. India therefore must continue to exploit its standing.

In this emerging thawing of relations between the US and Pak as also the US desperation to withdraw from Afghanistan, Pak could become a major player in resolving the Afghan crises, mainly because India continues to harp on its stance of talks being 'Afghan led, Afghan owned'. For India with the current progress of talks, a few scenarios could emerge, for which it needs to be prepared with options. These scenarios could be:

- **Scenario 1**. The US could toe the line of Pak and keep India away from being a part of the future Afghanistan.

- **Scenario 2**. The US could depart without resolving the Afghan crises as talks with the Taliban could fail.

- **Scenario 3**. The US convinces Taliban to be on a power sharing basis with the present or future elected government and continues to involve India in the resolution of the crises.

Scenario 1

Collusion between Pak and the Taliban is becoming evident. Both the Taliban and Pak have begun visualizing the US withdrawal from Afghanistan and the increased role of the Taliban in the country. Pak has hence begun openly announcing that India has no role in Afghanistan, an aspect which Afghanistan, US and even Iran disagree on.

The Taliban has thus far made no comments. There are also rumours that the Taliban is only willing to listen to Pak to a limited extent and is not overtly dependent on it as there are other supporters too engaging with it, including Iran, Russia and China. In a recent comment in the Raisina Dialogue in Delhi, the Iranian foreign minister stated that Iran was willing to use its contacts to coordinate talks between the Taliban and India. It has already held talks with the Taliban on post-withdrawal stability.

Trump is desperate to withdraw from the country, while hoping to continue maintaining a base there. His special envoy is thus fighting against time to obtain a favourable agreement, leading to an honourable exit. In this condition, Pak holds the key as it seeks to convince the Taliban to either come to a favourable agreement or delay talks till the US exits in disgrace. Which approach it takes would be evident shortly.

Pak may have placed one condition for its support to the talks which would be to keep India away from the country and participation in talks. Overtures by the US to Pak indicate its possible willingness to submit to Pak's demands. The participation of Saudi Arabia in the talks would be not be well received by Iran.

China would support the Pak stand, while Russia would never want Afghanistan to be under the sway of China and Pak. It would desire Indian involvement for its own reasons and hence invited India for talks which it had sponsored, though not much progress was made.

In this scenario, India must employ its contacts with Iran and Russia to be directly involved in talks with the Taliban, especially its plans for post-withdrawal of the US. While it may not officially announce its actions, it must open doors for the same. It cannot be a bystander in the country.

Scenario 2

If the talks were to fail or just linger on as at present, being stuck on issues of negotiating with the present government or terms of post-withdrawal, then there is a possibility of a unilateral US withdrawal. This is likely once US Presidential elections come close as withdrawal remains Trump's pre-poll promise. The Taliban and Pak are contemplating such an environment. In such a scenario, the country would be thrown into chaos.

While the US would be criticized for this action, Trump would not act as he has taken similar unilateral decisions earlier, including recently on Syria. This could work to the advantage of Pak as it could employ its troops in the garb of the Taliban seeking to overthrow the existing regime and place a government of its choice in the country, ensuring that India has no role. India in such a case would not have many options. It could only bank on Iran's connection with the Taliban to keep its foothold continuing in the country.

Scenario 3

This is a win-win scenario for both the US and India. It would guarantee the US an honourable withdrawal, a continued base in the country and India would remain a major player in the future of Afghanistan. However, with the present stance of the Taliban, willing to break talks and refusing to sit on the same table with the Afghan government, such an option appears unlikely for the moment, unless the US can offer the Taliban some concessions including immense development funds.

For Pak such a scenario is unacceptable, and it would employ its power to prevent the same from emerging. India can assist in creating this scenario by becoming involved in talks with the Taliban, either using the Iran or Russian connection or using the US line to project its promise of continued financial support in development.

Analysis

Any of the three scenarios is feasible. It depends on a few factors. The first is the way the US conveys its future intentions. If it continues to harp on a withdrawal or indicates desperation for an early peace, then it would play into the hands of the Taliban. The second is the proactive stance which India takes in engaging with the Taliban.

Thirdly, is the involvement of Iran, a nation which again could play a major role in the country. Finally, is the pressure the US can apply on Pak to ensure that it supports the US stand and not seek a destabilized nation, which could again be detrimental to world peace and security.

Conclusion

The Taliban is unlikely to be the same as was present in Afghanistan prior to 9/11. It has witnessed fruits of development in nations, mainly the

Middle East where talks are in progress, and would seek the same for the country. This may be against the design of Pak, which would continue to desire a weak and impoverished state as its backyard, dependent on it.

It is this desire of the Taliban which the US and India should target, if it seeks a peaceful transition post US withdrawal. Remaining a bystander and expecting Khalilzad to convey the progress of talks would ensure India remains a mute spectator in the future of Afghanistan. It must be proactive if it seeks to offset Pak designs on its future role.

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