

Democratization in Afghanistan

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Good Morning!

1. It is a privilege to speak at the IISS, London and address such an informed and distinguished audience on how India views 17 years of international involvement and the current situation in Afghanistan. A warm word of thanks to Rahul Roy-Chaudhury for the invitation and for chairing this session.

1.1 Before I proceed, I must clarify that I will be speaking today in my personal capacity as I have no role in the Indian government any more. I sincerely hope though, that my words have a little more value than that. Let me forewarn you that most of what I have to say is pretty bleak.

1.2 The subject of today's talk as framed by the IISS and Rahul just now is 'Democratization in Afghanistan', but the sub-text is really the threat posed to it by the peace talks. So, let me tackle that question head on.

2. From the point of view the US and West, the case for peace talks with the Taliban, divorced from its mistakes, flaws, costs and difficulties, sounds compelling. The current narrative goes something like this: After 17 years of a US led war against terrorism in Afghanistan, a troop surge in 2010, and a new muscular strategy announced by President Trump in August 2017 on the one hand, and the enormous cost of the war to Afghanistan, the US and others in lives¹ and treasure² on the other, the war has reached a stalemate with an estimated 50% of Afghan territory under control of the Taliban, and cannot go on indefinitely. There is no military solution to the Taliban on the battlefield. Peace talks therefore are an imperative.

3. Looking at the the Afghan side, it is felt that despite the huge investment of the international community in governance, security, human rights and development in Afghanistan, the Afghans too have not quite stepped up to the plate.

¹ 2,200 plus US soldiers, 62,000 Afghan soldiers and police killed since 2001, and more than 24,000 civilians in the past decade alone.

² Nearly US\$ 1 trillion in military expenditure and US assistance, let alone the cost in terms of lives and treasure of other international partners.

3.1 Security-wise, despite impressive achievements in countering dramatic terrorist attacks and takeover of provincial cities like Kunduz and Ghazni amongst others, it is believed that without operational US support, the Afghans security forces will not be able to stem the Taliban tide.

3.2 Politically, while Presidential and parliamentary elections have been held, their results have been severely contested and required US intervention, and governance remains a mess. The prevailing ‘warlordism’, ethnicity and tribalism too are viewed as antithetical to democracy.

3.3 Though the 2004 Constitution is acknowledged as an achievement, some argue that the seeds of the present political crisis lies in the exclusion of the Taliban from its drafting and is therefore arguably not adequately representative of the Afghan people. How this was possible in the aftermath of Ahmad Shah Massoud’s assassination and 9/11, when the Taliban were a defeated force, not even recognized by the international community, and Osama bin Laden still at large, is not explained and surely a revisionist hindsight.

3.4 Finally, democratization and human rights including women’s rights, while laudable and desirable, are not the reasons why the US is in Afghanistan. They are there to prevent Afghanistan from becoming a safe haven for the Al Qaeda and ISIS, and if that can be secured, it is really for the Afghans to figure out a social and political system suitable for themselves. Even as firm a democrat as President Obama, more or less acknowledged this once.

4. The implicit link between a political system that harbors extremism and terrorism and one that fights it, which was the reason for democracy and nation-building (albeit nation-building ‘lite’) in Afghanistan in the first place, is conveniently forgotten.

4.1. Also implicit is another assumption that somehow the Taliban with their demand for an Islamic Emirate represent an authentic Afghan voice and that ‘democracy’ as the West knows it, is not suited to the Afghans.

4.2 According to this narrative, there is therefore no alternative to a negotiated peace in which the West negotiates its security interests and the Afghans negotiate their political system. As the US is in a hurry, it has become necessary to jump-start the talks by direct talks with the Taliban bringing the Afghans in later.

5. Though superficially seductive, this narrative is flawed on several counts, logical, political, and security, and far from bringing peace and stability could have profound security and other implications for Afghanistan, the region and beyond.

Let us interrogate each of these elements one by one.

5.1 First, the logic of the current peace processes: There is no question that after nearly 40 years of foreign intervention, internal conflict and externally supported terrorism, the Afghan people want peace, not least the Afghan government, that has gone out of its way to court it. The issue is not peace, but what kind of peace. They do not only want peace (as opposed to war), but also an end to terrorism. This is a critical distinction.

6. It is one thing to argue that a peace process is necessary, and quite another to claim that what is being presented now is the answer. There are several reasons to feel that the present processes will, more likely, only lead to another chapter in the Afghan quagmire and make things worse.

7. First, that they are not really led by the Afghan people but by outside powers driven by their own interests.

7.1 The US compulsion is essentially to get out of its military commitment in Afghanistan [and let the Afghans fight out their battles themselves). I leave you to guess what the Russian motivations are (essentially to make the most of the US discomfiture in Afghanistan).³

7.2 Both are together on one point: they do not care what happens to Afghanistan provided extremism and terrorism do not spill over into their homeland or spheres of influence.

8. This is apparent in the outline of the ‘framework’ revealed so far where the basic understanding hinges around a US troop withdrawal from Afghanistan in return for guarantees that Afghanistan will no longer be a safe haven for terrorists who can strike the US. This is a Faustian bargain.

³ [I will leave aside the motivations of others – Pakistan, Iran and China, for the moment. Pakistan has its own interests that are clearly at cross-purposes with those of Afghanistan. Iran’s interests are more complicated. China has its reasons to keep the US at a distance, but is also wary of extremism in its under-belly in Xinjiang, and unsure if Pakistan can take care of it for them.]

Under this, Afghanistan will have to live with Taliban terror to prevent terrorism in the US. The US entered Afghanistan in October 2001 to fight a war against terror. Even the Americans cannot be oblivious of what that means to that war.

8.1 Granted that this is only one element of the framework, and other elements such as a ceasefire, talks with the Afghan government, a possible a delay in the July Presidential elections, and an interim government, are still to be addressed. [Of these, the last two are controversial if not dangerous.] But having achieved international recognition through the US and Russian led peace talks, and sensing blood, the Taliban are in not mood to compromise; and one cannot escape the feeling that the concessions being offered on the table are just a smokescreen to grab power.

9. Second, the Afghan people want peace, but a peace on their terms and at their pace. At the very least, they wish to preserve the gains of the last 17 years. This was made quite clear even by those who participated at the Moscow meeting.

10. Third, there are two processes at work, the US process that aims to bring in the Afghan government eventually, and the Moscow process that is willing to bypass the Afghan government and rely on other political parties and forces pursuing their own political interests, if the Taliban does not permit. The Moscow talks have effectively conceded this.

10.1 The Afghan government has been willing to negotiate this with the Taliban since the London Conference. With the US behind the Afghan government, there was a balance at the negotiating table. By striking its own path, offering to draw back military support and acting as a facilitator, the balance has been tilted in favor of the Taliban.

10.2 The same is true for the Moscow talks. The Afghan representatives at the Moscow Conference may represent key political forces, but they cannot claim to represent the will of the people.

10.3 The intra-Afghan dialogue and public legitimization of the Taliban by the US, Russia and Pakistan will thus reduce the elected government in Kabul to just one of the participants, a quite unacceptable interference of the international community in Afghanistan's Constitutional order.

10.4 Similarly, talk of an interim government in place of Presidential elections will essentially take Afghanistan back to square one, the only

difference with the Bonn talks being that instead of the allied groups who captured Kabul with the help of the US, Pakistan and its proxies along with an assortment of others, variously vetted by the US and Russia, will forge a coalition. Such a government cannot be representative.

10.5 Of course, there is an attempt to harmonize the two processes, but at this point one can only hope that the Afghan government and the constituency that it represents is not left high and dry at the insistence of the Taliban. But this cannot be taken for granted and will have to be insisted on.

11. Fourth, and this is particularly important, the two processes together, one talking directly to the Taliban, and the second, bringing in political forces at a tangent from the Afghan government at the expense of the latter, runs the risk of undermining the entire structure on which the post-Bonn Afghanistan in which we have all invested, has been built.

11.1 If the Afghan government were to be delegitimized and marginalized, all the institutions based on this structure too would erode. This could open a dangerous political and security vacuum similar to 1990s.

12. I am not arguing here for the popularity of the present Government or even its political base. This can only be proven in elections that are due in a few months and for which candidates have announced their intentions. But whatever may be the shortcomings of the post Bonn dispensation, the 2004 Afghan Constitution, and the numerous attempts to negotiate a peace and reconciliation process so far, one point is notable: that the post-Bonn consensus in Afghanistan has held.

12.1 Despite political frictions and ethnic rivalries, to date no Afghan political figure has questioned the fundamentals of the Afghan constitution, and no Afghan politician has crossed over to the Taliban. On the contrary, at least one belligerent, the Hizb-e-Islami Hekmatyar, has re-joined the political arena. In a country as fractious as Afghanistan, that itself is something.

12.2 One of the sad outcomes of the so-called peace process (frankly, I am not convinced it is a peace process; it is, rather, a disengagement process [or rather a negotiated surrender]) is that that consensus is now at stake.

12.3 There is one thing I have always told my Afghan friends. They cannot do anything about the international community who naturally will make decisions based on their interests and their costs, and these will change from time to time. They cannot also count on a change of heart by Pakistan or the Taliban. Such decisions are out of their hands.

12.4 The only thing in their own hands is their own unity. United, they have braved foreign interventions and the Taliban, and they can face up to Pakistan if necessary. Divided they play into others' hands.

12.5 Through the current peace process, the international community has prepared the conditions to divide Afghanistan once again....to the benefit of Pakistan. But a divided country cannot deliver peace.

13. Fifth, the unraveling of the post-Bonn Constitutional order and political consensus would also have grave implications for the security of the region. Not only would it create conditions for others to take sides and interfere and intervene even more deeply in Afghanistan's affairs, but political instability and terrorism would spill over well beyond Afghanistan.

13.1 We are already seeing one version of this in what is happening in the Pulwana attack in J&K and its repercussions. This is a replay of the period after the Soviet withdrawal when Pak-sponsored terrorists turned their attention to J&K. It will not be limited to that, and cannot be easily contained in the region by the kind of guarantees from the Taliban that the US seems satisfied with.

14. One of the assumptions beneath such an understanding is that security concerns and the political system can be clinically separated. It is being forgotten that the Western contribution to democracy in Afghanistan was not merely to bring political rights to a deprived nation.

14.1 Rather, it was that democracy, or more widely, an open society underpinned by democratic values, and politically and economically integrated to the international community, (as the US did with Japan and Germany, and Europe and East Asia more generally with the Marshall Plan) was the best guarantee that Afghanistan would not once again become an extremist or failed state where extremist forces could harbor like-minded outfits. This is what happened during Taliban rule in Afghanistan. This link is being ignored.

14.2 It is another matter that in the flips and flops of US and Western decision-making [from President Bush to President Trump, including the decision taken at the London Conference in 2010 to talk to the Taliban,] this commitment was not taken to its logical conclusion. Regrettably, the UK has done more than any other country to legitimize the Taliban.

14.3 The Taliban can offer guarantees on international terrorism on the negotiating table today; but can they abandon their innate sympathy for extremist Islamist forces that threaten the region and world that brought Osama bin Laden to Afghanistan in the first place? Of all the Islamic causes that fire political Islam, the Palestinian issue and hostility towards the US, remain at the top. In the jihadist agenda, victory in Khorasan is the passport to the holy lands. Can we be sure that jihadi activity will be confined to Khorasan? Will this dilute jihadi fervor against the West or vindicate it?

15. Sixth, along with undermining the Constitution and institutions and the security of the region, the current peace talks also run the risk of sacrificing all the gains that Afghanistan has made since 2001, and wasting the huge investments that the West and others have made in it, not least democracy and human rights, including the advancement of women, in Afghanistan.

15.1 It is fashionable and facile today to disparage these achievements and characterize the post-2001 Afghanistan project as a failure, but these (successes) are real if incomplete.

15.2 I need hardly labor these gains before such an informed audience and they have been persuasively presented by Afghan government authorities, most recently by National Security Advisor, Mohib, at the Munich Security Conference and recorded in countless other reports and commentaries.

[I will just underline a few points in passing: the drafting of the 2004 Afghan Constitution after wide and intensive consultation through a Loya Jirgah; Presidential elections in 2004, 2009 and 2014; Parliamentary elections, most recently last year, proof if any is required about the popular faith in democracy among the Afghans; the impressive advances in education including girls education, infant and maternal mortality, freedom of speech and the growth of independent media, status of women, capacity building in governance, administration and security forces, especially the Special Forces, sports, growth of private sector,

roads, connectivity and energy (Chahbahar, the Lapis Lazuli corridor, TAPI, CASA 1000) etc.]

15.3 None of these would have been possible without the support of the international community including the US, the UN system, the European Union, the numerous international conferences on Afghanistan hosted by the UK, Japan, Turkey, and many other generous governments. Afghanistan's success is also very much their success. Its failures are also their failures.

15.4 But there is one gain that summarizes all the above that I would like to stress: the emergence of a whole new generation post-2001 that is changing the demography and face of Afghanistan, and who carry the promise of a modern democratic Afghanistan. Notwithstanding terrorism, they will not barter their freedoms for the Taliban.

15.5 If the international community abandons the democratization project to a cynical game of power sharing and patriarchy manifested in closed door negotiations whether in the Doha or Moscow formats, this is the constituency, actually their own constituency, the constituency that we ourselves have helped nurture, that we will be betraying. We will in effect be betraying ourselves.

[Sure, there have also been failures: Bitterly disputed Presidential elections, delayed and flawed Parliamentary elections, failure to hold elections to the Provincial Councils till date, controversial electoral processes, flawed electoral lists, poor security in many parts of the country that have prevented polling, entrenched tribalism and patriarchy, 'warlordism' (a word that I do not much like), poor leadership and governance, serious lapses of security that have taken precious Afghan and international lives in cities and villages, grievous errors in military and air operations that have wiped out families and created more resentment, and more....]

16. Before I wrap up saving a few comments on India's position on the Taliban, let me address perhaps what is the most obvious argument for talking to the Taliban: that they are a military and political reality, that by various estimates, they occupy between 40-55% of Afghan territory, that they are a legitimate political force within Afghanistan, that they represent the Afghan people, and that their legitimacy is apparent from the parallel government that they run in parts of Afghanistan.

16.1 This too is questionable. The Taliban claim to legitimacy is not based on any test of popular will. Indeed, there is fundamental contradiction between the idea of the Islamic Emirate and an Islamic Republic and as believers in the former, the Taliban do not believe in the 'popular will' reflected in the Islamic Republic (though apologists claim that they have made such a shift).

16.2 Their claim to legitimacy is based solely on their supposed control over Afghan territory. This, as we know, is through the use of force and terrorism against the people of Afghanistan and the international community, not the laws of war, and externally sponsored and supported. Accepting their legitimacy without such a test is to tantamount to accepting and rewarding externally sponsored terrorism.

16.3 Nor does control of territory necessarily translate into numbers or the support of the population. There has been a significant demographic shift in the last 18 years of internationally supported democracy and prosperity, towards cities, youth and democratic empowerment. The Afghanistan of today is not the same as the Afghanistan of 1996 where the Taliban were seen as a stabilizing force and liberators from the intra-Mujahideen conflict.

16.4 Today, they are seen as destabilizing and controlled by Pakistan, and atavistic. There are enough surveys, most recently an extensive survey conducted by the Asia Foundation, that indicate that the Afghan people may suffer them but they do not want the peace of the Taliban. They at best represent a current of political opinion in Afghanistan, not the dominant ideology. It is possible that they may share power for a while with jihadi leaders as part of interim arrangement, but this will be an uneasy compromise both for the jihadis and the Taliban. While the arrangement would be unstable and easy to fall apart, one cannot also rule out an internal resistance to their rule.

16.5 Of course, we cannot rule out that the Taliban could be a nationalist force and represent an Afghan voice, but that claim would be believable if they left their safe havens in Pakistan, cut off the covert support of the latter, stopped targeting civilians, and fought the battle by legitimate means from within Afghanistan. So far, they have not shown such 'independence'.

17. In the final analysis, the questions that we have to ask ourselves are the following: Is the choice being offered to the Afghan people through the peace processes ostensibly on their behalf, a choice between a peace

forced by terror imposed from outside, or a peace based on freedom from fear and respect for basic and fundamental freedoms and human rights (the same as what people desire all over the world)? A peace based on the logic of capitulation to terror, or a peace based on reconciliation? An inclusive peace, or a peace that excludes vast sections (or even the majority) of Afghans? A peace that is dignified and based on a balance of forces, or a peace that is in effect a surrender to terrorism in the name of peace? There a peculiar convergence between conservative Republicans and a section of liberal democrats on the logic of disengagement. By a perverse logic, those arguing for a dignified peace are now being portrayed in some quarters, as war-mongers. No less a person as former US Ambassador Ryan Crocker in several West Asian hot spots including Afghanistan, has described the 'framework' as a 'surrender'

Not used.

Let me now turn to the title of today's talk, 'Democratization in Afghanistan'. Implicit in the title are two related and antithetical questions: first, is democracy suited to Afghanistan? And second, is it worth for the West to expend blood, sweat and treasure fighting for it?

A second argument for talking with the Taliban is that the failure to defeat the Taliban after 17 years of nation-building in Afghanistan supported by the international community shows that Afghanistan is not ready for democracy and that if an Islamic theocracy is what they want, let them have it.

But there are also other perhaps more serious questions: Is what appears to be a failure of the US-led intervention in Afghanistan after 9/11 really a failure of democracy in Afghanistan or it more generally a political, military and diplomatic failure of its principal architects, both internal and external? Is it even a failure?

Did the West intervene militarily to bring democracy to Afghanistan? Or did it intervene to avenge the most vicious and audacious terrorist attack the world has seen so far, and prevent it from becoming a breeding ground of, or safe haven for, terror again?

Is Afghanistan really the breeding ground of terrorism or is it somewhere else?

The answers to these questions are too obvious to spell out. 17 years on, the original 'sin' is lost in a mist of time and memory, and we may be condemned to repeat the mistakes of the past.

It was not long back, during President Barack Obama's Presidential campaign that he contrasted the Afghan and Iraq wars characterizing the Iraq war as a war of choice, and the Afghan war as a voice of necessity, adding that while Afghanistan was the theatre of the war on terror, its locus was in fact next door, in Pakistan. In effect, Pakistan was the problem, not Afghanistan.

It followed that if the Afghan war had to be won, Pakistan would have to be dealt with. Once elected, he relied on a military solution in Afghanistan within a predetermined timetable, and a diplomatic approach towards Pakistan. That was the origin of the 'Af-Pak' hyphen and Richard Holbrooke's diplomatic mission. We know where that ended.

More recently, with some differences, that was also the basic logic of President Trump's August 2017 'South Asia Strategy'. Though welcomed by Afghanistan and India as a much needed corrective to past US policies in its approach towards Pakistan, it was a hopelessly one-dimensional strategy leaning wholly on a purely kinetic military strategy at the expense of a more comprehensive strategy using all available tools within Afghanistan – no political or pol-mil strategy, no economic, development or aid strategy – and no serious diplomatic strategy towards Pakistan save tweeted threats, or vis-à-vis other neighbours. Its virtual reversal in Special Envoy Zalmay Khalilzad's mission is however not surprising and quite consistent with the flips and flops of US policy towards Afghanistan.

Since the very beginning, the US has been beset with three syndromes in dealing with Afghanistan.

One is an attention deficit disorder epitomized by turning attention from Afghanistan to Iraq in 2004 prematurely.

The second, a compulsive prioritization of relations with Pakistan and reliance on the Pakistani Army.

And the third, a failure to apply the lessons of World War II and the Marshall Plan in winning strategic friends.

Like it or not, such a strategy implied some commitment to some form of nation building, money, security and economic integration.