Endgame in Afghanistan?

The Ghani government may be able to hold out for the time being, but the geopolitical situation doesn’t look good for India

Are we on the threshold of a complete takeover of Afghanistan by the Taliban forces? The complexity with which the Taliban has been establishing its control over large swathes of territory in the wake of a precipitous withdrawal of US and NATO forces, is certainly ominous. The Afghan government forces may be able to hold out for the time being in the capital Kabul and some other important metropolitan centres, but maintaining these islands of control within an expanding zone of Taliban-occupied and administered territory will be unsustainable.

It is clear that the Taliban are not content to have a share—even a lion’s share—of power in the government in Kabul. They are aiming at control over the entire territory of the Afghan state. While the Ghani government has lost the crucial operational military support it had enjoyed so far to keep the Taliban at bay, the Taliban is well supplied by Pakistan and reportedly has the advice and support of elements from the Pakistani Army. It is alleged that armed cadres belonging to the Pakistan-based Lashkar-e-Talib (LeT) and Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM) are playing an active role in the offensive. While Pakistan claims to be promoting peace between the Kabul government and the Taliban, it is fully invested in the establishment of a Taliban emirate across Afghanistan.

Pakistan has nurtured and given sanctuary to the Taliban over the past two decades. It has done so despite the risks involved from incurring American hostility and armed drone attacks against Taliban bases and fighters located on its territory. There is a sense of triumphalism at having seen off one powerful superpower and another. It is time for this investment to start paying dividends and the most significant of these dividends is to reduce, if not entirely eliminate, any Indian presence in Afghanistan, restore a base for cross-border terrorism against India with relative deniability and to serve its long-term objective to prevent Pashtun irredentism within Pakistan.

It is revealing that key regional players like China, Iran and Russia have all engaged with the Taliban leadership and thereby accorded it political legitimacy. They have obviously calculated that the Taliban are the future rulers of Afghanistan who must now be relied upon to safeguard their interests. The US may well reconcile to a Taliban-ruled Afghanistan and establish relations with it. The Europeans will follow after making boiler-plate urgings to the new masters to observe human rights and not reverse the freedoms Afghan women had begun to enjoy under a democratically-elected government. Unlike the 1990s, the Taliban enjoy greater political legitimacy. Chinese largesse will become available as long as the country prevents any shelter of and activities by the East Turkestan Independence Movement (ETIM) which is engaged in contesting Chinese rule in Xinjiang. The Taliban have recently made a public statement that they would not allow the ETIM to use Afghanistan territory for launching hostile actions against China. Both Iran and Russia are engaged in seeking similar assurances from the Taliban and all have recognised that Pakistan remains the most influential player in this respect. It may be tactically wise for India to also reach out and engage with the Taliban but this should be done without any illusion that this is a “nationalist” entity which could be detached, even to a limited extent, from its Pakistani patrons.

Even if the Taliban has nationalist pretensions, consider what could be the give and take in negotiations with Pakistan. Delivering on Pakistan’s demand for eliminating Indian diplomatic presence in Afghanistan or preventing any further Indian participation in infrastructure projects in that country may not be particularly onerous to the Taliban where the quid pro quo is getting Pakistan support for winning international legitimacy for the regime and be an influential interlocutor in dealings with a powerful China. Whatever may be China’s longer term calculations, it will, for the foreseeable future, rely on Pakistan in navigating the complex terrain of a Taliban-dominated Afghanistan.

None of this looks good from an Indian perspective. India’s role in Afghanistan is severely constrained due to a lack of access, with Pakistan blocking the way and the Iran route becoming more and more problematical. The Russians are content to follow the Chinese lead, which in turn means following the Pakistani lead. This is materially different from the pre-2001 period when India was able to fashion a coalition of sorts consisting of Iran, Russia and some of the Central Asian countries in supporting anti-Taliban forces, which later coalesced in the Northern Alliance. Even if such a potential coalition could again begin to crystallise, how will India extend support to it, including in the form of arms and other supplies?

There is a somewhat wishful line of thinking among both Indian and American analysts. It is argued that both Pakistan and China will become increasingly sucked into a vortex of instability, violence and internecine conflict that has been the hallmark of Afghanistan through much of its history. India should just bide its time and wait for history to repeat itself. Perhaps this scenario will come to pass eventually but in the meantime the potential for serious damage to India’s interests is patently obvious. The immediate fallout could well be on Jammu and Kashmir, which is an acutely sensitive space contested by Pakistan on one side and by China on the other. There are few good options available and biding our time may well be a compulsion, not a choice. A fundamentalist Sunni regime entrenched in Afghanistan and supported by both Pakistan and China will add to India’s vulnerability. There may be no alternative to using both overt and covert instruments to prevent its consolidation. This is what we did in the 1990s and the exercise may have to be repeated, although in more challenging circumstances.

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