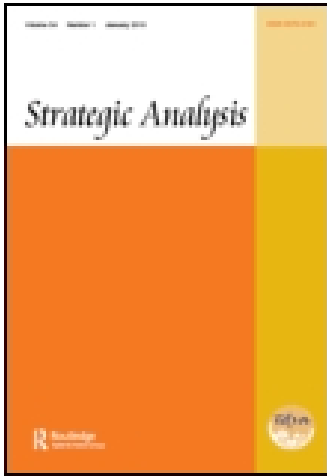


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Publisher: Routledge

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Strategic Analysis

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rsan20>

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Published online: 16 Dec 2013.

To cite this article: J.K. Baral (2013) The Afghan Game: Interests and Moves, *Strategic Analysis*, 37:6, 700-715, DOI: [10.1080/09700161.2013.847038](https://doi.org/10.1080/09700161.2013.847038)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09700161.2013.847038>

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The Afghan Game: Interests and Moves

J.K. Baral

Abstract: In Afghanistan, the third Great Game is still on. The end of US–NATO combat operations in Afghanistan by the end of 2014 will be read by many as ‘Obama’s Vietnam’, but the retention of a small number of troops and several military facilities by the US in that country will be a source of worry for countries such as Russia, Iran and Pakistan who are concerned about US motives and moves in regard to the region, especially Central Asia’s energy resources which are already a target of international competition. India and Pakistan, who suspect each other’s motives in regard to Afghanistan, can significantly help it to achieve peace and development by pursuing a cooperative strategy. Their attitudes towards Afghanistan seem to be experiencing a positive change warranting mutual understanding and cooperation.

Introduction

The drawdown of US and NATO troops in Afghanistan is scheduled to be completed by the end of 2014, but they intend to retain a small contingent of their troops in that country. Not only the Taliban but also several stakeholder states have opposed this. The unfolding drama in Afghanistan is likely to have significant implications for the ‘New Great Game’, which many think will play out in the coming years in the adjacent region of Central Asia and South Asia. As well as the US and Russia, several other states such as China and India have interests in this region which are of vital strategic and economic significance. This adds to the importance of the power game being played in Afghanistan.

This study, as well as analysing the conflict and competition for power and dominance among the various political organisations and ethnic groups of Afghanistan, examines the interests of external powers—near and distant—in this country, and the strategic/diplomatic moves made by them to further their interests. It focuses on the link between internal and external politics, the dynamics of the peace process and the scenario beyond 2014 in respect of security, peace, stability and power distribution.

Afghanistan is difficult both to defeat and to control, but it has seldom shown a serious inclination to control itself. Peace and order in the country have often suffered because of internecine conflicts and wars. Afghans are ardent nationalists, but their actions weaken national unity and integration. They are known for their spirit of fierce independence, but this independence may have been jeopardised by the intermeshing of internal conflicts and external intervention.

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The Afghan case

Afghanistan, because of its strategic location, has been a victim of external intervention throughout modern history. The British Empire and Czarist Russia made several failed attempts to dominate and control it. The British imperial government was keen to make Afghanistan the 'buffer state' between British India and Czarist Russia. The British fought three Afghan wars—two in the 19th century and one in 1917—but each time it met with failure and disappointment.

On December 25 1979, the Soviet Union sent troops to Afghanistan in order to prop up its client Marxist government in Kabul, but in the face of a powerful insurgency orchestrated by external powers including the US and Pakistan, it had to quit Afghanistan in February 1989. In the wake of terrorist attacks on the World Trade Centre, New York, and the Pentagon building near Washington DC on September 11 2001, US and NATO troops invaded Afghanistan on October 7 2001 under UN sanction, and they are now searching for a face-saving exit route. These 'Great Games', while showing the fighting spirit of Afghans, have proved to be a 'graveyard of empires'.¹

Afghanistan is the connecting link between South Asia and Central Asia and has a population of about 23 to 25 million. Its people are afflicted by chronic poverty, backwardness and ignorance. It is a multi-ethnic society: the main ethnic groups are Pashtun (40 per cent), Tajik (33 per cent), Uzbek (9 per cent) and Hazara (11 per cent).² The Pashtuns inhabit the south while others live in the north. The Hazaras are Shiites while others are Sunnis. Afghanistan has a long history of foreign interventions, internal colonialism, obscurantism and ethnic conflicts.³ Democracy suffers due to widespread illiteracy, deep-seated feudalism, religious fanaticism and gender injustice. According to a UN report, 14 per cent of Afghanistan's population is involved in opium cultivation and 80 per cent of the world's opium is produced along the Afghanistan–Pakistan border. A high proportion of drugs money lines the pockets of terrorists. Many important people in Afghanistan as well as in neighbouring countries are involved in the drugs trade. Thus, there is a close nexus between international terrorism, narco-terrorism and Afghan insurgency.⁴

In Afghanistan, there is a fair degree of regional variation in respect of political/administrative culture.⁵ In the urban north, the warlords have left behind a relatively well-built administrative structure which has proved resilient in the face of changing political control. The south, on the contrary, has largely failed to develop such an administrative structure. Since the days of the Durrani dynasty, the rulers of the south have tended to ward off potential challenges by buying the support of tribal chiefs/local strongmen, who are notorious for defection and shifting loyalty, through patronage. Unlike in the north, they have seriously failed to build states with regularised revenue sources, bureaucratic administration and public services. This partly explains the more difficult state-building challenge in the south than in the north. The failure of the Karzai government to efficaciously govern the south resulted in a power vacuum which the Taliban has successfully exploited.

American involvement since the late 1970s

The Soviet military intervention in Afghanistan in December 1979 provided an opportunity for the US to turn Afghanistan into the Soviet Union's Vietnam. Ironically, in Vietnam, the Vietnamese Communists had forced the US to quit their

country in disgrace and humiliation in 1974 with Soviet support. The Carter administration—looking for a turnaround after its failure to rescue the American hostages in Iran in late 1979—organised a powerful front against the Soviet troops in Afghanistan. This, however, did not improve Carter's prospects in the presidential election. Ronald Reagan, the next president from the Republican Party, continued with his predecessor's Afghan policy with vigour and armed and funded Afghan Mujahideen with the assistance of the Inter Services Intelligence (ISI), the notorious intelligence agency of Pakistan. Heavy losses and frustration in the battlefield forced Moscow to withdraw its troops from Afghanistan in February 1989.

The Mujahideen, who ruled the country from 1992–1996, turned out to be a disaster. Due to internal bickering it proved to be very weak and inefficient. As a result, it lost the confidence of its patrons—the US and Pakistan—who supported the replacement of the Mujahideen by a new Afghan group called the Taliban to safeguard their economic and strategic interests in the region.⁶ Both the US and Pakistan were then pursuing separate projects to tap and transport the oil and natural gas of Central Asia, and each project had a key role for Afghanistan as a transit corridor. The Taliban, with the direct/indirect support of these two countries, captured power in Kabul in September 1996. (In this article, Taliban means Afghan Taliban.)

Pakistan continued to support the Taliban as its close ally in Afghanistan. But Washington's support did not last long, mainly because of the Taliban's nexus with al-Qaeda, who had started hitting American targets in 1993.⁷ Convinced that al-Qaeda, then headed by Osama Bin Laden (who was hiding in Afghanistan at the time) was behind these terrorist attacks, the US started hunting for him and pressured the Taliban regime to stop supporting him. In 1998, soon after the terrorist attacks on its embassies in two African countries—Kenya and Tanzania—the US attacked terrorist camps in the Afghan town of Khost, but failed to capture Bin Laden, in the process killing a number of Pakistani terrorists who had gone there for training in waging jihad in Kashmir.⁸ In a meeting held in Berlin in mid-July 2001, attended by the US, Russia, Pakistan and the Northern Alliance, the US delegate revealed that action against Bin Laden was imminent and that military action against the Taliban would be taken if it did not surrender him. It seems that Pakistan leaked the US plan to the Taliban/al Qaeda,⁹ and that the terrorist attacks on the US on September 11 2001 were 'pre-emptive strikes' against imminent American attacks on al Qaeda/Taliban.¹⁰

9/11 and beyond

During the two years preceding September 2001—the year of the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon building—the UN and the European Union, apparently under US pressure, had imposed sanctions on the Taliban for its nexus with al Qaeda.¹¹ The US had great influence over these two important organisations. The Taliban refused to cooperate in catching the al Qaeda leader, Bin Laden, even after September 11. This led to further UN sanctions and the US-led war against them. Within 24 hours of September 11, a UN resolution authorised the use of force against al Qaeda and the Taliban, and NATO invoked Article 5 of their constitution for the first time in history.¹²

In the war on terror, or 'Operation Enduring Freedom', US and NATO troops received prompt and critical support of the Northern Alliance, an alliance of

non-Pashtun forces consisting of Tajiks, Uzbeks and Hazaras, and in a short-time—by January 2002—they were able to defeat the Taliban. The Taliban, instead of putting up a strong fight, beat a quick retreat, and its leaders and followers fled in large numbers to Pakistan, where they have been taking shelter ever since. However, the Taliban's retreat was strategic and deceptive. Taking advantage of the shift of US focus from Afghanistan to Iraq in March 2003, the Taliban regrouped and started its assaults on the coalition forces in Afghanistan since 2006. The Karzai government, with its ill-trained and ill-equipped Afghan National Security Force (ANSF), aided by about 100,000 US and NATO troops, was seen to be losing ground to the Taliban with every passing day, and today the Taliban's dominance in the south is quite palpable.

Operation Enduring Freedom had two main objectives—military and political. The Bush Jr. administration aimed at disrupting, defeating and dismantling al Qaeda and the Taliban in order to prevent them carrying out any future strikes on the US. It also promised to build democracy in Afghanistan, a country that had seldom experienced democracy. George Bush Jr. had two terms as president, but by the time he left office there was little sign of an early end to America's military involvement in Afghanistan.

Enter Obama

Barack Obama, the Democratic candidate in the presidential elections of 2008, criticised Pakistan's role in the war against terror, and said that, if elected president, he would view Pakistan as a 'combat zone' if the latter failed to move decisively against the Taliban.¹³ On the basis of the recommendation of his Review Team, President Obama pronounced his 'Af-Pak' strategy on March 27 2009. President Bush's 'democracy' project was de-emphasised, and the central objective of making the US secure and safe from the al Qaeda threat became the focus. President Obama's 'focused' goal was to disrupt, dismantle and defeat al Qaeda in Pakistan and Afghanistan, and to prevent their return to either country in the future. Thus, the battle theatre was expanded: it encompassed both Afghanistan and Pakistan. Pakistan was included in the battle theatre as several terror groups continued to have 'safe havens' in its Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) adjoining the Afghan border. The basis of the strategy was 'two countries, but one challenge'. In the new strategy, the emphasis shifted to Af-Pak.¹⁴ The strategy succeeded to some extent and Bin Laden was killed in a high-voltage secret operation (Operation Geronimo) by American navy Seals on May 2 2010. After Bin Laden's elimination, President Obama announced that the US would start drawdown of its troops from Afghanistan on June 22 2011 in an effort to 'wind down' the war and withdraw completely by 2014.

While claiming success in US efforts to decimate al Qaeda, the president could not hide his disappointment at the state of affairs in Afghanistan. He observed in his subsequent statements that the aim of the US was not to make Afghanistan a perfect country, or to establish a 'Jeffersonian' or 'model' democracy there.¹⁵ This was a quiet admission that the decade-long efforts of the international community to build democracy in Afghanistan had largely failed. From this time onwards, there was a view slowly coming to the fore among the strategic community in the US that the problem of Afghanistan became so difficult to resolve because of India-Pakistan rivalry in the region. This issue begs further study and analysis.

The India–Pakistan issue

It is true to a certain extent that, given their problematic relationship since their creation in 1947, both India and Pakistan tend to see their relations with any other country (and especially with the US) from a zero-sum-game perspective. In case of the US, even if it has sought to balance its relations with both these countries, it is perceived to be leaning towards one or the other in one historical context or another. For example, unlike in the Cold War period when the US–Pak alliance was close and special, in recent years there has been a marked improvement in US–India relations. Even though Washington has taken steps to assuage Pakistan’s suspicion and worry, there is a dominant perception in Pakistan that US foreign policy has taken a decisive shift towards India. This may explain some of the strains between the US and Pakistan in contrast to a fair degree of understanding and cooperation between the US and India on the question of Afghanistan.

There are several reasons for US disillusionment with Pakistan. The US has repeatedly accused Pakistan of failing to destroy the ‘safe havens’ of terrorists in its territory and to cut the nexus between its army and ISI and the terrorists (al Qaeda, the Taliban and the Haqqani group). It has alleged that the Afghan terrorists are the ‘veritable arm of the ISI’, and these terrorists are ‘snakes’ who will bite not only the neighbours (India and Afghanistan) but also Pakistan itself which has nourished them.¹⁶ President Obama has even warned that Pakistan, which is in the midst of extremism, will be consumed by extremism.¹⁷ But Pakistan retorts that not long ago the Haqqani Network, the group responsible for major attacks on the US, was the ‘blue-eyed boy’ of the CIA.¹⁸

Being disappointed by Pakistan’s unwillingness to take on the FATA-based foreign terrorists, the US has been attacking their sanctuaries with the help of unmanned drones. The drone attacks, which commenced during the Bush Jr. period, have increased in frequency during the Obama years. In the first year of the Obama presidency the CIA carried out 53 drone strikes on Pakistan while in the following year the number more than doubled to 117. According to a New American Foundation estimate, between 1,819 and 2,808 people were killed in drone attacks in Pakistan alone from the end of 2004 to May 2012, and about 80 per cent of them have been killed during the Obama presidency.¹⁹ In response to Pakistan’s complaint that these attacks amounted to violation of its sovereignty, Washington retorted that Pakistan was losing its sovereignty due to the ‘safe havens’ of terrorists within its boundaries, not due to drone attacks. In June 2012, Hillary Clinton, then US secretary of state, said, ‘[t]hey (Pakistanis) are losing sovereignty. They have large areas that are ungoverned...’.²⁰

India–Pakistan role conflicts

The long-festering Indo-Pak conflict, having its origin in the partition of British India in 1947 and being heightened over the years both by the intense strains between Pakistan’s Cold War alignment with the US and India’s non-alignment and the wars they fought between them, has cast its shadow over their respective roles in Afghanistan. New Delhi, which looks upon Afghanistan as a friendly country, favours its emergence as a democratic and peaceful country free of external intervention and control. But Islamabad—more specifically, its military establishment at Rawalpindi—has long sought to keep Afghanistan under its influence and use it for strategic purposes.

Pakistan's role and perceptions

Pakistan views Afghanistan as its 'strategic backyard', and the Pashtun militants who are sent to India to indulge in terrorist violence as its 'strategic assets'. It is therefore trying to gain 'strategic depth' in that country. It seems concerned over India's growing relationship with the US as well as with the existing Afghan government. It is worried that India, which enjoys goodwill in the north, is also gaining popularity in the Pashtun areas through its soft power and developmental activities.

Pakistan alleges that India is using Afghan territory to aid and instigate Baloch insurgents and to spy on Pakistan. It charges India with using its connections and facilities in Afghanistan to 'encircle' it. India has opened consulates in Herat, Hazar-e-Sharif, Jalalabad and Kandahar, which allegedly provide cover for Indian intelligence agencies to run covert operations against Pakistan as well as foment separatism in Balochistan.²¹ Pakistan is afraid of being sandwiched between India and Afghanistan, whose bilateral relations have shown improvement in recent years. The terrorist attack on India's consulate at Jalalabad on 3 August 2013 seems to have been jointly carried out by Pakistan's ISI and Pashtun militants.

Pakistan's allies in Afghanistan are Pashtun militants—the Taliban and the Haqqani Network who are fighting against the Karzai regime and the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF). These militants enjoy hospitality in their 'safe havens' located in Pakistan's tribal areas near the Afghan border. There are 40 million Pashtuns living in Pakistan and 15 million residing in Afghanistan. A good number of these Pashtuns still dream of one day having a Pashtunland or Pashtunistan and do not accept the Durand Line, which they complain was imposed on them by the British in 1893. Pakistan, which is aware of this, would want a 'proxy' government in Kabul which would either accept the Durand Line or at least not demand its redrawing.

Among the Pashtuns of Pakistan, the most militant and powerful group is the Pakistani Taliban, which is as much militant Islamist as the Afghan Taliban.²² The Pakistani Taliban, although entrenched in the FATA, has spread to other parts of the country. It has close ties with several Islamist parties and organisations. In the past it extended support to the Afghan Taliban, but it has of late focused on Pakistan. It has attacked Pakistan's military establishments and government offices several times. This provoked the Pakistan government to take action against it, although the former continues to patronise the Taliban and the Haqqani Network (the Haqqani Network claims that it is part of the Taliban although it is largely autonomous in its functioning).

India's role

India is engaged in Afghanistan's reconstruction and human resource development. It hopes that its developmental diplomacy will help it win over the confidence of Pashtuns in the south and east and reduce the chances of them falling prey to Pakistani machinations again. It is committed to spending \$2 billion on Afghanistan's reconstruction. In contrast, Pakistan's assistance is much smaller at only \$300 million. In 'soft power' projection India is also far ahead of Pakistan. India's films and soap operas are quite popular in Afghanistan. The links between the two countries are very old. New Delhi will be right in leveraging its soft power to promote its interests in Afghanistan and to improve their bilateral relations.²³ It has undertaken a number of human resource development projects covering education,

health and communication links (roads and railways).²⁴ India has built the 218-km Zaranj–Delaram highway linking Afghanistan to the Iranian port of Chabahar. This road, while giving Afghanistan access to the sea via Iran, would help India to overcome the Pakistani blockade of export of Indian goods to Afghanistan and Central Asia through its territory. India is also negotiating the construction of a 900-km rail line from Afghan iron mines in Hajigak in Bamiyan province bordering Iran to Zabul on the Afghanistan–Iran border and thereafter for shipment through the Chabahar port of Iran.²⁵ The development of Chabahar port with India’s assistance is likely to help it to effectively contain and counter China’s ‘string of pearls’ or ‘encirclement’ strategy, which is centred on the Gwadar port of Pakistan’s Baluchistan province.²⁶

Training is an important component of India’s support for Afghanistan’s development. It is providing training for Afghanistan’s diplomats, civil servants, police officers and army men. Military training is taking place in India. But Afghanistan would gain more if this training were conducted in Afghanistan itself, according to a former Indian army chief.²⁷ Incidentally, the Strategic Partnership Agreement signed by the two countries on October 4 2011 provides for military training and equipment. The Afghan government has also requested the government of India to supply lethal arms for its forces, but New Delhi has so far declined the request by arguing that it is not willing or able to meet it.

The Afghan journey has subjected India to suffering and pain. Many Indians, including a diplomat, a military officer, security people, technical personnel and ordinary workers, have fallen victim to the bullets and bombs of Pashtun militants. India’s embassy in Kabul has been hit several times by these terrorists. The most ghastly was the attack on the embassy on July 7 2008, killing 58 people including an Indian diplomat and a senior military officer.²⁸ New Delhi, Kabul and Washington have alleged that Pakistan’s intelligence agency—ISI—was behind this attack.²⁹

In India, there is widespread concern about the return of the Taliban with Pakistani assistance. It is feared that if the Pashtun region comes under Taliban control, it would again be a breeding ground for terrorists sent by Pakistan to India.

India–Pakistan–Afghanistan triangle

The above-mentioned perceptions of Pakistan and India about their conflict of interests in Afghanistan have reinforced the hostile images they have about each other. Broadly, Pakistan and India perceive their interests in Afghanistan as conflicting and, not surprisingly, they have traditionally backed opposite sides—the Taliban/Haqqani Network and the Northern Alliance respectively. However, there seems to be some change in the Indian position of late. India has apparently informally suggested accommodation as opposed to confrontation in its official dialogues with Pakistan. India, whose position in Afghanistan has improved significantly in recent years (which can be gleaned from recognition of its good work even in the Pashtun belt in southern Afghanistan), is urging Pakistan to work together in a cooperative manner in building peace and development in this war-torn country.

New Delhi’s proposal to Islamabad to work together to help Afghanistan settle down has so far not found any takers in Pakistan. Riaz Mohammad Khan, Pakistan’s ex-foreign secretary, acknowledges this and observes that New Delhi’s suggestion for cooperation, which was ‘substantive’, ‘generated ephemeral interest in Islamabad

which was soon to be lost in the downturn in relations' following the train blasts in Mumbai.³⁰

Even if there has been no perceptible change in the behaviour of the Pakistani government so far, there is a perceptible change in some section of the strategic community in Pakistan in recent years. This might have been triggered by changed realities. There is a view that the Taliban and the Haqqani Network, although capable of harassing and tormenting the US and Afghan forces, would not be able to win the war, even in the Pashtun area. Moreover, the blowback effect of the Taliban's return could have adverse effects in Pakistan. Many Pakistani commentators observe, especially in the English language media, that Pakistan's mentoring of the Afghan Taliban has boomeranged and its security forces are finding it difficult to deal with the Pakistani Taliban, i.e., Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). Pakistan might be hoping to better handle the problem of the Pakistani Taliban if peace is established in Afghanistan. Therefore, easing of the relationship with India through innovative methods such as working together to stabilise the situation in Afghanistan is being discussed, albeit sparingly, in the Pakistani media. The end of the Cold War coupled with the track-two diplomacy may have led to growth of peace constituencies in both Pakistan and India, which could take these ideas forward. The return of Nawaz Sharif to power (with his emphasis on repairing and normalising the relationship with India) has also raised hopes in both countries about the revival of the Lahore spirit. There is a link between the Indo-Pak conflict on local issues and their conflict and rivalry in Afghanistan, and success in conflict resolution on either front is likely to lead to success on the other front as well.

The China factor

China and India, two 'rising powers', have already entered into a trade and investment race in Africa. This competition has been extended to Afghanistan and Central Asia. Afghanistan is rich in natural wealth and resources such as iron ore, zinc, coal, gold and copper, which, according to the American Geological Survey, are worth \$1 trillion.³¹ While China has won a copper mining project worth \$4 billion, an Indian consortium has been offered an iron ore project worth \$10 billion. Business presence in Afghanistan would encourage these two countries to venture into the more attractive business in Central Asia involving the exploration and transportation of natural gas and oil. China is widely perceived as a 'free rider' in Afghanistan.³² It is making substantial economic gains without being directly or indirectly involved in any stage of the war in this country. Though an ally of Pakistan, it may not be favouring a Taliban victory because of the alleged links between the Taliban/Al Qaeda terrorism and the terrorism afflicting China's Xinjiang province.

Moves to stabilise Afghanistan

International conferences

The six important conferences on Afghanistan held post-September 11 are the Bonn Conference (November 27–December 5 2001), the London Conference (January 28 2010), the Kabul Conference (July 20 2010), the Istanbul Conference (July 2011) and the Bonn Conference (December 5 2011). Pakistan boycotted the second Bonn Conference in protest against the American drone attack on November 26 2011,

which killed 24 Pakistani soldiers. The first Bonn Conference nominated Hamid Karzai as the interim president of Afghanistan and resolved that a new Afghan constitution be written, and general elections be held.³³ The London Conference reached a consensus on talking to moderate Taliban elements who would abjure violence and cut off links with Al Qaeda.³⁴ At the Kabul Conference, President Karzai demanded the withdrawal of all foreign troops from Afghanistan by the end of 2014, and gradual takeover of security in the provinces by his government. However, NATO Secretary General A.F. Rasmussen emphasised that ‘conditions, not calendars’ would govern the timetable for the takeover of security by Afghan forces.³⁵ The Istanbul Conference called for respect for the sovereignty, unity and territorial integrity of Afghanistan as well as the principle of non-interference in its internal affairs.³⁶ At the second Bonn Conference, the international community, while recommending an ‘inclusive order’ in Afghanistan, pledged to remain strongly engaged in its support beyond 2014.³⁷

The peace initiatives and US about-turn

The US-led war in Afghanistan has become increasingly unpopular in the US mainly because of the human and financial losses it has caused. The US has spent \$450 billion so far on this war, which had also cost the lives of more than 1,500 American soldiers by mid-2011.³⁸ This prompted the Obama administration to decide to bring to an end America’s military involvement in Afghanistan by the end of 2014, but it is determined to prevent Afghanistan from turning into ‘Obama’s Vietnam’. In order to achieve these two objectives, it has resorted to the mixed strategy of war and diplomacy, which Mahapatra describes as ‘defence diplomacy’.³⁹ Peace initiatives and drone attacks have gone side by side. Military operations by the US and its allies are being used to strengthen its peace strategy.⁴⁰ This is also the strategy of Pashtun militants who are continuing with their violent offensive in order to maximise their bargaining leverage in the peace talks. Mullah Mohammad Omar, the Taliban leader, said on August 6 2013 that the Taliban’s policy is to continue attacks even as it pursues negotiations.

If America suffers a military defeat in Afghanistan, Russia might be pleased because in the 1980s the US inflicted a military defeat on the Soviet Union in Afghanistan. But America’s exit from Afghanistan by the end of 2014 may create problems for Russia itself. Moscow is gripped by the fear that the return of the Taliban’s dominance, if not its rule, in Afghanistan would encourage infiltration of terrorism and drug-trafficking into its territory via the Central Asian Republics. Moscow therefore argues, albeit unconvincingly, that the US and NATO troops are bound to stay in Afghanistan until the UN mandate under which they had entered the country after September 11 is implemented.⁴¹

The war in Afghanistan has reached a stage of stalemate. True, the resurgence of the Taliban in 2006 was a setback to the ‘war on terror’, but US and NATO troops, effecting a ‘surge’, have been able to stem its offensive. With the help of the US and its allies, the Afghan government forces have grown large and strong. But there is little sign that on their own they would be able to defeat the Taliban and its allies. The latter have demonstrated their capacity to attack their enemy and kill many, but they might have realised that they would not be able to decisively defeat their enemy/enemies and bring the whole country under their control. Pakistan, regarded as the chief mentor and patron of Taliban, is reluctant to support the peace-making process and may be barely

participating in the process because of tremendous American pressure. It is quite apprehensive of losing its influence on Afghanistan if the peace process leads to an inclusive government in Kabul, not dominated by its 'strategic assets' (read Taliban). Thus, in Afghanistan today, there is a tentative move towards reconciliation, with each stakeholder wary of the other, and hence the process does not seem to take off at all.

The US, which has strong domestic compulsions to quit Afghanistan at the earliest, appointed Richard Holbrooke as special envoy to give shape to its Af-Pak strategy.⁴² His original jurisdiction covered Afghanistan, Pakistan and even India, in line with President Obama's belief that the Afghan conflict and the Kashmir conflict were interlinked and that the establishment of peace in Afghanistan required managing the Kashmir conflict.⁴³ Owing to strong protests from India, Kashmir was excluded from the portfolio of the US special envoy. However, the US seems to be nudging both India and Pakistan into negotiating on Kashmir.

Secret meetings have taken place between the Karzai government and Pashtun insurgents at Riyadh and the latter also met separately with US interlocutors at Doha in January 2012.⁴⁴ Ahmed Rashid, a well-known Pak journalist, claims that the US government contacted the Taliban in Germany on 28 November 2010.⁴⁵ In addition to these exploratory bilateral talks, several rounds of international conferences have been held both in Afghanistan and abroad. These discussions, however, have failed to make much progress.

The US has come a long way from totally opposing any idea of cooperating with the Taliban because of its links with al Qaeda, to a position that allows for talks with the Taliban because, unlike Al Qaeda, it does not pose a direct threat to its security. Moreover, it has allowed itself to buy into the Pakistani position that there are moderate Taliban elements it could talk to. India has reluctantly gone along with the US line, although initially it was of the view that terrorists could not be 'compartmentalised'.⁴⁶

In reality, perhaps under Pakistani pressures, even some elements close to the Mullah Omar faction, alternately known as the Quetta Shura, have expressed their desire to become involved in dialogue with the US and the Afghan government, as the recent Doha episode suggests. The US and Taliban delegates had also met earlier at Doha, the capital of Qatar, in a preliminary round, but the negotiation came to a halt due to the failure of the US to release five Taliban militants from Guantanamo Bay prison, and some other provocative incidents. Many Afghans, particularly Pashtuns, were infuriated by a video clip showing US marines urinating on dead Taliban men, the burning of Quran copies on an American base (Bagram air base was then under American control), the killing of 17 civilians by an American soldier who was allowed to leave Afghanistan and return to his country, and US soldiers posing with the corpses of Pashtun militants.

The 'talks about talks', held both at bilateral and international levels, have not made much headway. One of the factors afflicting the Afghan diplomacy is the lack of trust among the main stakeholders. Kabul and Islamabad are afraid of being bypassed.⁴⁷ The Karzai government suspects that the Taliban may directly negotiate with the US. It is also worried about the possibility of the US going over its head and directly talking to the Taliban and Islamabad.⁴⁸ Pakistan is worried that the Taliban, while pursuing its interests, may neglect the interests of its mentor. Another factor is the timeline. Time is not on the side of the US and NATO, who have committed to their drawdown by the end of 2014. But the Taliban and the Pashtun militant allies are not in a hurry. One of their options is to 'wait out'. Like Vietnam, they hope that

Afghanistan will fall into their lap following the pull-out of US and NATO troops.⁴⁹ However, they are not excluding the other option. A London-based study, based on interviews with several senior Taliban leaders who are known to be close to Mullah Omar, makes an optimistic assessment and says that the Taliban are prepared to work with the US. They will give up violence, cut their links with al Qaeda and allow the US to retain four military bases until 2024. But the US will have to turn military assistance into economic assistance.⁵⁰

Washington's Afghan policy is afflicted by ambiguity, vacillation and contradiction. It is critical of the 'nexus' between the Taliban/Haqqani group and Pakistan's ISI and army. But it wants Pakistan's 'legitimate' concerns in Afghanistan to be addressed. It is pressurising Pakistan to cut its links with the Taliban/Haqqani Network, and to destroy their 'critical sanctuaries' in Pakistan's tribal areas bordering Afghanistan. But it favours the presence of these militant groups at the negotiation table. Washington has shown little seriousness about taking any action on its threat that Pakistan would have to pay a 'price' if the 'safe havens' in the FATA are not closed down.

While the Obama administration is keen to carry forward the Doha agenda, many people in the US have doubts about the efficacy of this peace plan. They think that with the exit of US and NATO troops, the Taliban may take over Kabul, although it is unlikely to bring the north of the country under its occupation. An ethnic-cum-civil war may again break out. Two other possible scenarios are a weak centre with powerful regional governments/ regimes, or an Afghan federation consisting of several independent states formed mainly on the basis of ethnicity.

Blackwill, a former American diplomat, has proposed a 'Plan B' in Afghanistan. He has advised the US to reconcile itself to the 'de facto partition' of Afghanistan—the south under Pashtun militants and the north under the Northern Alliance.⁵¹ In contrast, the 'Plan A-Minus' proposed by O'Hanlon and Riedel requires the US and NATO troops to go on fighting for a few more years to gradually pass the baton to the Afghan security forces.⁵² This plan had been proposed in the winter of 2011, and the US and NATO are unlikely to reverse their 'exit' schedule.

Options and moves

The peace talks on Afghanistan would comprise several circles. The innermost circle of talks would include two parties, namely the Afghan government and Pashtun militants comprising the Taliban and the Haqqani Network. The Northern Alliance, which is part of the government, is thus assured of representation. The middle circle would consist of the US and Pakistan. While the US and its NATO allies have been militarily engaged in Afghanistan since late 2001, the Taliban, including the Haqqani Network, owe their origin and growth to Pakistan since around the mid-1990s. However, the line between the innermost and middle circles would be blurred. Although physically situated in the middle circle, the US and Pakistan would functionally belong in the innermost circle.

The external circle would include a number of countries such as Britain, France, Germany, Turkey, Russia, China, Iran and India. Qatar, the host country of the talks, may find a place in this circle. The UN may act as mediator or facilitator. At Doha, the venue of the peace negotiations, Pakistan would not be directly involved, but it cannot be ignored as it is recognised by some as 'key' to an Afghan solution. While depending upon the Taliban to safeguard its interests, it would also pressurise the

US to ensure that India does not steal a march on it. India would mainly depend upon the Karzai government in which the Northern Alliance is represented to protect its legitimate interests.

Future India–Pakistan interaction

Both India and Pakistan are aware that what happens in Afghanistan will have a significant impact on their long-drawn adversarial relationship. Each of them appears to think that a government of its choice in Kabul would tilt the balance of power in the subcontinent in its favour. India may gain sufficient leverage over Pakistan by defeating the latter's design and move in Afghanistan. As Raja Mohan has succinctly observed, 'New Delhi's road to Rawalpindi runs through Afghanistan'.⁵³

New Delhi would not like Pakistan to play an important role in negotiations on the future of Afghanistan because of the latter's alleged terrorist and divisive role in that country. But the US and even Russia, Iran and Tajikistan, which are generally well disposed towards the Northern Alliance, do not agree with India on this point. They are of the view that Pakistan which is 'part of the problem is also part of the solution'.⁵⁴

Pakistan, though scared of the demand for Pashtunistan or Pashtunland, favours significant Pashtunisation of Afghan diplomacy. It advocates important roles in negotiations for the Taliban and the Haqqani Network, which are its local allies, if not proxies, and through whom it hopes to pull the strings. New Delhi, in contrast, would like to see an 'inclusive' and 'transparent' government in Kabul representing all regions and ethnic groups, not only Pashtuns but also Tajiks, Uzbeks and Hazaras. Opposing Pakistan's attempt to dominate Afghan diplomacy through its local allies, India wants it to be 'Afghan-led' and 'Afghan-owned'. New Delhi would be concerned if rich Muslim countries like Saudi Arabia and Qatar, which have close ties with Pakistan, are allowed any important role in the peace talks. It has similar reservations about Turkey.

India and Pakistan, like most other adversarial players in a conflict-cum-bargaining situation like this, are therefore expected to adopt their maximalist strategies, whose interplay would amount to a zero-sum game. However, it may be rational for them to think of the minimalist strategy where both sides may be mutually accommodative. In other words, they could also be expected to play a non-zero-sum game.⁵⁵ (See Table 1.)

The minimalist strategies of India and Pakistan may not conflict with one another, and all stakeholders, including these two, would likely agree on an inclusive and coalitional government which, as well as producing ethnic balance and meeting regional aspirations, would provide political stability.

Conclusion

The three Afghan wars constituting the first Great Game demonstrated the strong nationalism and fighting spirit of the Afghans. In the second Great Game they were able to defeat the Soviet Union with the support of the US and its allies. The third Great Game is apparently heading towards America's defeat.

The 'exit' of US and NATO troops by the end of 2014, however, may not signal victory for those wanting international forces to move out of Afghanistan. The Pashtuns are divided, and the conflict between the Taliban and the Northern

Table 1. Positions of India and Pakistan on Afghanistan.

Maximalist Positions	
Pakistan	India
A pro-Pakistan government in Kabul dominated by the Taliban/Haqqani Network	The Taliban and Haqqani Network not to be included in the new Afghan government
Complete withdrawal of US/ISAF troops from Afghanistan	Indefinite presence of US/NATO troops in Afghanistan
Cessation of drone attacks by the US on targets inside Pakistan	The suppression of Pashtun militants by all means
International recognition of the Durand Line as the border between Pakistan and Afghanistan	
Denying India any commercial, military or intelligence presence in Afghanistan	Strengthening of India's presence in Afghanistan
Minimalist Positions	
Pakistan	India
Fair representation of Taliban/Haqqani Network in the Afghan government	Fair representation of Northern Alliance in the government
No more drone attacks by the US on targets inside Pakistan	India not to lose its space in Afghanistan

Alliance is too bitter to be resolved soon. Both sides may be persuaded to join a coalition government, but mistrust and tension between them would linger. Russia and Iran may derive pleasure from America's military failure in Afghanistan, but they are worried that the Taliban's dominance would facilitate the flow of narco-terrorism from Afghanistan to Iran, and Central Asia to Russia. There is also apprehension in India that a Taliban victory in Afghanistan would trigger the increased export of Pak-sponsored terrorism in India and hinder its access to the energy-rich Central Asia.

The US and Afghanistan have agreed that a small contingent of troops drawn from both the US and NATO would stay on to advise and train Afghan troops. John Kerry, the US secretary of state, insists that the US would 'drawdown', not 'withdraw' from Afghanistan. In return, Afghanistan would receive substantial economic assistance. The Tokyo International Donors Conference held in July 2012 pledged \$16 billion in economic development aid to Afghanistan between 2013 and 2017.

There is the scare of a 'Second Vietnam'. Iraq is back into a spiral of violence. It has tilted towards Iran. The US wants to leave Afghanistan without losing face. It wants to ensure that after 2014 Afghanistan is not ruled by anti-US forces. It hopes to achieve this objective through a negotiated settlement. Hence, it has thrown its weight behind the Doha talks. It is no longer interested in establishing an ideal democracy in Afghanistan or in punishing the Taliban, the close ally of Al Qaeda. The three 'Red Lines' fixed at the London Conference have been blurred. The Taliban has expressed contempt for the Afghan constitution, and has hardly refrained from violence. It is not clear if it has cut its links with al Qaeda whose resurgence in Afghanistan post-2014 is a possibility.

The peace talks would be influenced by the ground situation in Afghanistan. The turf war between the Taliban/Haqqani Network and the Afghan government backed by the ISAF would continue, even during the negotiations. Both sides would resort

to a mixed strategy of war and talks. The fight for dominance would be mostly confined to the east and south of the country.

The US, NATO members and the Afghan government are aware of the help and support extended by the Pakistani army and ISI to the Taliban and Haqqani Network. But Pakistan will be allowed to take part in the talks, albeit indirectly, because of its influence over the Taliban/Haqqani group.

India, which has earned a lot of goodwill in Pashtun areas through its developmental activities, does not intend to displace Pakistan from Afghanistan. There seems to be a new thinking and realisation emerging in Pakistan in regard to India which would have a positive impact upon Afghanistan. Some Pakistanis have begun to realise that all wars between Pakistan and India were initiated by the former, and that its anti-India policy has not paid off. They have also started to feel that rapprochement between the two countries would be good for both. They are positively inclined to respond to India's call for cooperation in helping Afghanistan to find peace and progress. However, the Pakistani military will have to be won over to this line of thinking to bring about changes in Pakistan's foreign policy. It is desirable that India and Pakistan peacefully coexist in Afghanistan and cooperate with each other to help Afghanistan settle down.

There would, however, be sceptics asking whether this is possible given the ongoing conflict between Pakistan and India on terrorism, Kashmir and other local issues, and their conflict in Afghanistan. Parallel progress in peace talks on both fronts would be ideal. However, failing this, it is possible for them to find a meeting ground in Afghanistan, and that may encourage them to find solutions to Kashmir, terrorism and other problems. The recent political change in Pakistan may be the catalyst of fundamental change in Pak-India relations. Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, who has advocated Pak-India peace, may catalyse a paradigmatic shift in Pakistan's attitude towards its neighbours in the east and west.

In Afghanistan, there are two roads—the road to conflict and war, and the road to peace. The war, though not a traditional one, is ongoing. The peace-making process has also commenced. Pakistan, as well as the Afghan government, the Taliban and the US, is considered crucial to this process. In this respect India has less strategic importance. However, it is involved in several activities related to social reconstruction and economic development. Peace is not sustainable without a good foundation of social and economic development. This means that India is contributing to *peace-building* while Pakistan would be more associated with *peace-making*.⁵⁶ Thus, Pakistan and India, unless they try to undermine each other's role, have the potential to make important contributions to the peace, security and development of Afghanistan.

Poverty, drug-running, corruption, terrorism and ethnic conflicts are serious impediments to peace and development in Afghanistan, which is also poor in unity and integrity. The peace-makers have to contend with several 'spoilers'—groups who may fear that a peace agreement will seriously harm their interests.⁵⁷ These include al Qaeda, Pashtun insurgents and drug traffickers. External powers, while giving help and support, are guided to varying degrees by their own interests. Afghanistan would benefit if they joined hands to link it to a joint project of regional integration and development. It would be better if both internal and external players viewed Afghanistan as a non-zero-sum game bringing benefits to all, including Afghanistan itself.

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