IS INDIA READY FOR THE RETURN OF TALIBAN IN AFGHANISTAN?

US President Barack Obama’s proclamation that US has largely achieved its goals in Afghanistan and his subsequent intention of “ending the war responsibility”, set in motion a substantial withdrawal of troops in an acknowledgement of the shifting threats and the fast changing politico-economic landscape in the war weary America. As the President faces relentless budget-related pressures, an increasingly restive American public and a re-election campaign next year, it was somewhat apparent that the Afghan troop reduction (which was decided after a short but fierce internal debate,) will be both deeper and faster than the recommendations made by Obama’s own military commanders. The already impatient European allies of US were smart enough to grab the occasion and declaring plans of drawing down theirs contingent from Afghanistan. The result was seen in Bamiyan, which became the first province to pass to local control in July 2011, setting in train the gradual withdrawal of foreign forces from Afghanistan.

The US has admitted the Taliban as being a part of the Afghan nation and concluded that it does not threaten America’s “homeland security” and has stressed on reconciliation with the Taliban and expressed optimism about the peace process. Though the regional opinion largely advocates against a long term US military presence in Afghanistan and are optimistic about the timeline for the drawdown-10,000 troops by end-2011, 33,000 by mid-2012 and the bulk of the remaining 70,000 troops at a “steady pace” through 2013-14, India which has a large stake in the result does not seem to be too welcoming of this trend.

Afghanistan is the venue of India’s largest foreign aid programme till date. India had to make an exit from the country following the deterioration of the security conditions and the advent of Taliban and decided to close her Embassy after the violent killing of president Najibullah by Taliban. Unlike Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and UAE, India never recognized Taliban’s assumption of power in 1996. Year 2001 gave a new lease of life to the bilateral relations between the two countries and India being one of the America’s most dynamic War on Terror partners decided to invest heavily in the reconstruction of the country with projects invested amounting to roughly $ 1.5 billion. During his visit in May 2011, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh announced another additional $500 million worth of investment, over and above India’s existing commitment. Considering that a return of Taliban (may be in a different avatar) is a likely scenario, what would that imply for India and her ongoing investments in the country. Therefore, it might be apt to seriously weigh different options, one of which might as well be establishing contact and communication with the Taliban.

Indian Government rightly believes that US forces would not disappear overnight from Afghanistan. Even if Obama sticks to his schedule of troop withdrawal, 68,000 US troops are supposed to remain in Afghanistan which is significantly more than the number
present when he became President. A repetition of the civil war situation of the 1990s also seems to be a remote possibility. Taliban was a cohesive movement where Pakistan directly participated by providing Pakistani air force, artillery, armored corps, regular officers and Intelligence agency. Subsequently there was advent of other regional powers in the picture providing assistance to the non-Pashtun groups who were anti Taliban. But that was a period when the countries had not experienced the blowback of terrorism in the extent it did in the post 9/11 phase and most importantly, in the post Afghan War period, America’s presence and stakes were not as pronounced as it is today. If conditions adversely alter to a situation similar to the one before 2001, then this entire decade long investment in the form of money and human lives of America and her allies in Afghanistan would be under scanner. No country would like to deal with an adverse public opinion, which would be inevitable incase the situation in Afghanistan goes completely out of hand. Indications are that the US will maintain about 20,000 troops in Afghanistan even in the modest scenario. So India has to remember two important things at this moment- a) Afghanistan minus ISAF is not a likely scenario b) Reconciliation with Taliban is inevitable.

A change in India’s stance; from rejection of any approach which includes reconciliation with Taliban, on the grounds that there can be no such thing as ‘good Taliban’-‘bad Taliban’ needs to be re-examined. Therefore, accepting dialog with those Taliban elements that are prepared to renounce violence, can serve as a good ‘starter’ in this direction. Therefore India should establish communication lines with the Taliban — assuming, of course, it wants to talk to India. After all, India did talk to Mr. Sayyaf, leader of the Ittehad, which Jalaluddin Haqqani served as commander. Considering Karzai is convinced about reconciliation with elements of the Taliban while the US proposes offering financial incentives to encourage talks, India can contemplate utilizing this channel to get her access. Post Abbottabad, when there were indications that relation between Taliban and Pakistan has hit rough water and Pakistan’s “perfidy” hasn’t merely made the US angry; it has shown Uncle Sam to be a sucker. India should have been proactive in telling the world ‘we told you so’- tragically even that confirmation of Pakistan’s habitual duplicitous conduct left Manmohan Singh strangely unmoved. He has instead reaffirmed his faith in Pakistan’s innate goodness-a gesture of monumental magnanimity that is prone to being misconstrued.

There can be several speculations regarding the future of Afghanistan, but one thing is certain, that the future would be Islamist. A conservative tribal and Islamist society might not forget and forgive that India had always stood by the foreign invasion and occupation and has always pleaded for an extension. Her good intentions of strengthening the people to people contact through building institutional capacity and developing human resources along with her considerable soft power presence in the form of Bollywood might not be able to change that. India’s objection to troop
withdrawal will have little appreciation from the rural masses (which form the overwhelming majority) who see it as un-Islamic.

India rightly stresses the importance of improving Afghan Government’s capacity of fighting terrorism and has maintained that any reconciliation process should be Afghan led, inclusive and transparent. India and other regional actors should try to read Obama’s words carefully when he said that the US can no more “over-extend … confronting every evil that can be found abroad.” Beijing recently wrote to New Delhi that it would like India to play a bigger role in Shanghai Cooperation Organization, holds a key to not just resource rich central Asia but also the security situation in Afghanistan as the US drawdown starts to take effect.v

The bottom line remains, what India wants to see in Afghanistan is much less important in comparison to what it sees unfolding there. What is required is a realistic estimation of the prospective scenario and formulations of approaches, tactics and policies based on that.

Web Article

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i “Obama plan: Cut war spending and invest more in America”, Times of India, 24th June, 2011.


iii “Taliban’s Return and India’s Concern” by M. Bhadrakumar. The Hindu, 27.6.2011.

iv “Wimpish India may lose the Great Game” by Swapan Dasgupta. Times of India, 8th May 2011.

v “China Favours Bigger Indian role in Asia”, Times of India. 25th July, 2011.