The Opening Gambit at Kabul

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The Indo-Afghan Strategic Partnership Pact of October 4th 2011 suggests serious posturing by India in Afghanistan after quite some time. After being content for nearly a decade in steadily working its way to becoming the largest regional donor to the country, India is now positioning itself with an eye to eventually influencing the security apparatus that would come of its own once the US (and therewith the NATO) pulls out by 2014. India’s commitment to training Afghan security apparatus, without establishing any major military profile for itself in the country, conforms ostensibly to the tried-and-tested non-intrusive strategy of capacity building. This is calculated, presumably, to not alarm Islamabad into any subversive misadventure in Afghanistan as a result of Indian involvement there. In that sense, the opening gambit is not a bad one, but a lot will turn on how India plays it afterwards.

India’s involvement in the Afghan tragedy in the recent past, however, does not readily inspire much confidence in New Delhi’s ability to play things well. India had recognised the puppet communist regime led by Najibullah when Moscow had gone into Afghanistan in 1979. Unlike Islamabad, however, India had no agenda of developing any strategic depth – largely because the Soviets would not allow India any room. Pakistan thus acquired a substantive political and military mileage by aiding and abetting the Mujahideen resistance against ‘foreign occupiers,’ whereas India gained nothing. In the civil war that followed in the 1990s Pakistan backed the Pashtun mujahid Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, whereas India weighed in behind the aged Pashtun leader (killed the other day) Burhanuddin Rabbani. Pakistan’s support for Hekmatyar was premised upon the notion that, should he come to power in Kabul, Pakistan would gain some political and military mileage in Afghanistan, and would also be able to repatriate the hundreds and thousands of Afghan refugees who were severely dislocating Pakistan’s north-western frontier region. When Hekmatyar failed to deliver as a result of the resistance of the Tajik leader Ahmed Shah Masood and the Uzbek warlord, Abdul Rashid Dostum, Islamabad changed its game-plan. It unleashed the predominantly Pashtun refugees trained in the madrsehs of FATA and Khyber-Pakhtunkhwah – the Taliban. Given the force the Taliban represented in the war-ravaged politics of Afghanistan in the 1990s, the regional powers India, Russia and Iran began to individually or collectively throw their weight behind those who chose to resist it – viz Masood, Dostum, Rabbani, etc.

Since those days, India has consistently worked against the Taliban in Afghanistan, principally because it was grafted in Kabul by Islamabad. The ouster of the Taliban regime in the wake of 9/11 revived India’s interests in the country. Although India was smart enough to avoid being dragged into military operations by the US, it played a noticeable role in the rebuilding of Afghanistan. Apart from the various schools and health facilities run by India in Afghanistan, the roadway running between Zaranj and Chahbahar, connecting southern Afghanistan with Iran has transformed the economic character of the region. The incumbent Karzai administration, finding its attempts at bringing peace to the various regions of the country thwarted by resurgent Taliban factions (presumably with support from Islamabad), has favoured the option of opening dialogue with some of these factions – to the great chagrin of India, which believes, Taliban cannot be negotiated with. The security pact is likely to be used by New Delhi to drive home this point as its price for support to the beleaguered Karzai regime. Should that really turn out to be the case, it would be unfortunate.

For one, as in the past, India is putting in quite a lot of political capital behind an individual who is either manifestly unpopular (as Najibullah was) or unable to carry the country with him (like Rabbani). Karzai has the dubious distinction of being both unpopular and ineffective, propped up in power only by US troops. Having pumped the kind of resources that New Delhi has done, it makes sense for India to to
continue to invest in the people, and whoever can bring peace to them. If a government involving the Taliban appears to be the best shot in this direction, New Delhi should not shy away. Second, the assumption that the Taliban that is currently plaguing the NATO and Karzai in Afghanistan is the same that Islamabad put into power in the 1990s. It is not. These are a motley group of regional forces resisting US occupation, led by those who had associated with the Taliban in the earlier era. This realisation has come home to a number of powers. The USA today distinguishes between ‘the good Taliban’ and ‘the bad Taliban,’ talking with the one while fighting against the other. Another inveterate enemy of the Taliban regime, the Islamic Republic of Iran also has undertaken the policy of supporting whoever is capable of restoring peace to the country, even if it were Taliban. Moreover, even if these were the very same Taliban, New Delhi would do well to remember that upon gaining power in Kabul even the Mullah Muhammad Omar regime refused to play Islamabad’s lap dog. Pakistan’s support for the US operations in Afghanistan after 9/11 was partly influenced by the consideration that the Taliban were much less amenable to them than they had hoped for.

The best way India can develop a long-term presence in Afghanistan is to continue with the task of capacity-building (infrastructure, education, health, even security), but not making such effort specific to the regime (i.e. Karzai). Even if the Taliban were to return to power (quite likely), India should stay the course, working with them. This idea appears anathema to the Indian establishment, because the Taliban are Islamic fundamentalists, therefore “baddies.” However, if the Indian connection can be made to appear adequately rewarding for the Taliban, they may not turn out to be all that bad after all. Consider the options. Indian opposition to the Taliban could rekindle conflict in Afghanistan, thus not only undoing all the good work, but also encouraging the Taliban to bring the conflict to India, via Pakistan. On the other hand, Indian support for a Taliban-led government could reduce Islamabad’s significance as the only regional ally for a beleaguered regime in Kabul. New Delhi may find even the Taliban useful in pre-empting a resumed Pakistani bid for acquiring strategic depth in the war-torn country.

Given the strategic pact with Kabul, India now has an institutional linkage to build up on – Pakistan knows this, and is bristling as a result. Hence, the arguments for thinking out-of-the-box are quite pressing. If India chooses to invest in the people of Afghanistan, rather than make a call on who rules over them, the dividends may turn out to be pretty high. The opening gambit of the strategic pact might just be beginning of such a game. But have we the nerve to play it?

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