Would Pakistan Exit Afghanistan?

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The experience of last three decades has clearly shown that the lack of stability in Afghanistan has wider consequences for its neighbours in West, South and Central Asia – which explains why Istanbul was chosen as the venue for latest round of deliberations on Afghanistan. For many observers of Afghanistan, the right and proper tone for the talks was set by Turkey’s clear and categorical condemnation of the destabilising role ISI plays in Kabul, a charge that Pakistan denies in a very unconvincing manner. A general consensus appears to be developing, outside Islamabad, that Pakistan must exit from Afghanistan and desist from interfering from Afghan domestic politics for the region to stabilise in the medium run.

There can be little disagreement that Pakistan should withdraw from Afghanistan, and leave the Afghans to their own devices (perhaps for the first time in its history). But the more important question is, would it do so? As the Afghan President Hamid Karzai had occasion to recently point out, Pakistan and Afghanistan are tied to each other with an umbilical cord. And the ties are very unlikely to be easily severed, because the Afghan tragedy of the past three decades have disfigured Pakistan no less than it has Afghanistan.

Pakistan began to figure in Afghan politics in earnest only after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, with Islamabad being the route through which the USA pumped money and military aid to the Mujahideen resistance. Even after the Soviets left nearly a decade later followed by the USA, Pakistan stayed back, providing assistance first to Gulbuddin Hekmatyar and then to the Taliban all through the 1990s. When the Taliban regime came a cropper with the USA after 9/11 for having sheltered Osama bin Laden, Islamabad swiftly disavowed the Taliban regime, and supported US military operations against them. However, now that the prospect of US withdrawal from Afghanistan looms large, Islamabad (and particularly the military, and more specifically the ISI) appears to be following a policy of running with the hare and hunting with the hound – cooperating with the US programme for stabilising the Karzai government, and simultaneously opening a back channel with the Taliban.

The Indian establishment has always maintained that Pakistan’s motive for going into Afghanistan had been to acquire “strategic depth” against India. Even if such a motive existed, it was not central to Pakistan’s scheme of thinking. What we frequently tend to ignore about the Af-Pak scenario is that Pakistan bore the brunt of refugee problem unleashed by Soviet presence in Afghanistan. In course of the 1980s and 1990s, the number of Afghans seeking refuge in Pakistan steadily crossed the three million mark, completely transforming the demographic character of the two frontier provinces of Pakistan – Khyber Pakhtunkhwar and Balochistan, and also FATA (Federally Administered Tribal Areas). While the overwhelming majority of the refugees, who were Pakhtuns or Pathans, took shelter in the predominantly Pathan province of Khyber-Pakhtunkhwar, it has allowed Pashtoo to overwhelm other languages like Hindu –
Peshawar, traditionally a predominantly Hindu-speaking town, is now swamped by speakers of Pushtoo. In Balochistan, the transformation can be measured by the fact that Baloch is no longer the predominant language spoken in the provincial capital, Quetta – it has been replaced by Pushtoo. This in turn has resulted in the resurgence (with much greater intensity than earlier in the 1970s) of secessionist movement in Balochistan, as also a massive internal migration out of Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa into Punjab and Sind, which in turn has increased sectarian tensions among Sunnis in Punjab as well as between Shi’i and Sunni in Afghanistan.1

Given the dislocation caused by the demographic transformation of Pakistan’s frontier regions, Islamabad has a far greater interest in the stability of its neighbour than any other country. However, given its predicament, Islamabad needs not merely a stable regime in Afghanistan, but actually one that is committed to, and able to pave the grounds for, the precipitate return of Afghan refugees. Hence, after the Soviet pull-out Islamabad began to support the Pakhtun warlord Hekmatyar, hoping he would be able to inspire the refugees to return home. When that failed, Islamabad tried to mobilise the refugees themselves, educated in the seminaries and madrasahs of the frontier provinces, to seize power in Kabul behind the banner of Taliban. However, Islamabad’s hope of being able to control the Taliban came to nothing, for the Taliban regime, having come to power, had no desire the play to Islamabad’s tunes. Thus, the refugee problem continues to haunt Pakistan. Islamabad therefore needs a regime that is not merely friendly, but also mindful of Pak predicament more than anything else – hence its persistent presence in the politics of Afghanistan.

The Karzai administration has not always played this role for Islamabad, which goes quite a long way in explaining why the ISI continues to carry out or support stealth operations in Afghanistan (such as the attack on the Indian Embassy in Kabul). This is largely because given the shambles the Afghan economy has been reduced to, it would be quite a challenge to provide economic opportunities for the people who are now actually inside the country, let alone for refugees returning home. Hence, Karzai administration, just like the Taliban before him, has been not particularly keen on settling the issue of repatriation in Islamabad’s favour. This in turn makes Islamabad, and particularly the military establishment, to try manoeuvres beyond their mandate as allies of the USA and NATO in Afghanistan, playing a hand that frequently invites stern criticism from Washington DC – such as the alleged support that Pakistan extends to the Haqqani network, and some elements of the Taliban who have no desire to make peace with the Karzai administration.

It is important to stress Islamabad’s own requirement for a stable Afghanistan to emerge, for if Afghanistan remains unstable, it might turn out to be merely a matter of time that the Pathans on either side of the Durrand line give the call for an independent Pakthunistan. Should it emerge,

1 For a detailed analysis of the changing demographic landscape of Pakistan, and its impact on the country, see Mohammad A. Qadeer, Pakistan: Social and Cultural Transformations in a Muslim Nation, (London and new York: Routledge, 2006).
the very existence of Pakistan would be at stake, because given the changing demographic landscape of Pakistan the demand would not affect only Khyber-Pakhtunkhwah region, but also parts of Balochistan and Punjab. Further such a demand would fuel secessionism in Balochistan as well. Thus, it is very unlikely that in the medium term Islamabad would want to settle in favour of any regime that it has no stake in.

In the light of the above, any international arrangement for the stabilisation of Afghanistan is almost doomed from the very beginning, unless it calibrates the matter of repatriation of Afghan refugees from Pakistan with the reconstruction of Afghanistan. This is not to argue that Islamabad should be given a veto in the process, nor is it to argue that Islamabad’s preoccupations should be given priority over those of Kabul. This is merely to make the case that if Islamabad’s concerns are not (and not seen to be) addressed, then Islamabad is very likely to throw a spanner in the wheel – regardless of whether India gains mileage in Kabul in the zero-sum diplomatic warfare with Islamabad.

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