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Arshad Ali

2012

Arshad Ali. (2012). Endgame in Afghanistan : Pakistan's new approach. (RSIS Commentaries, No. 230). RSIS Commentaries. Singapore: Nanyang Technological University.

<https://hdl.handle.net/10356/104551>



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No. 230/2012 dated 19 December 2012

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By Arshad Ali

Synopsis

Recent developments in Pakistan-Afghan relations indicate a major shift in Pakistan's Afghan policy. Islamabad has presented itself as a facilitator instead of a blocker to a solution to the Afghan insurgency. This will help Pakistan secure its role in the Afghanistan endgame.

Commentary

THERE IS growing interest in the endgame in Afghanistan as the United States plan to exit from Afghanistan in 2014 approaches. Washington and its NATO allies are looking towards a political settlement in Afghanistan after their withdrawal. Similarly, Pakistan is also concerned about the future of Afghanistan. Any instability following the ISAF withdrawal would have serious consequences for Pakistan should millions of Afghans flee to the country.

To facilitate the peace process in Afghanistan, there is a need for a political settlement and reconciliation among Afghanistan's opposing factions, including the Afghan Taliban. The main hurdle is how to bring the Afghan Taliban and other factions to the negotiation table for a peaceful settlement in Afghanistan. Pakistan has the capability to bring the Afghan Taliban into the peace process, though the Afghan government and international community are suspicious of Pakistan's intentions.

Breakthrough in the peace process

On 14 November 2012, Pakistan released nine Afghan Taliban prisoners during the visit of the Afghan High Peace Council led by Salahuddin Rabbani, thus meeting an old demand of the Afghan government to hand over the Afghan Taliban prisoners to Afghanistan. The Afghan officials are reportedly pleased with the release of Taliban prisoners as they believe this would help in the reconciliation process in Afghanistan. Under an agreement, the released Taliban leaders would be allowed to move freely across their mutual borders to facilitate the peace process.

The release of Taliban prisoners by Pakistan was not only welcomed by Afghan leaders but also Western diplomats in Kabul. More importantly, it is seen as a shift in Pakistan's policy towards Afghanistan and marks progress towards a political settlement of the decade-long insurgency in the country. Rabbani, the Head of the Peace Council, termed the release of the Taliban prisoners a breakthrough in the peace process in Afghanistan.

On the other hand, Pakistan has requested Kabul to take action against the sanctuaries of the Pakistani Taliban in the Kunar and Nuristan provinces of Afghanistan from where they were involved in cross border attacks. The Afghan government has issued a statement that they will take action against the Pakistani Taliban in a move to reciprocate the gesture of the Pakistani government.

Pakistan has been perceived by the Afghan government and international community as a supporter of extremist forces in the Af-Pak region. Pakistan has also been blamed for providing sanctuaries and safe haven to the militants who conduct attacks in Afghanistan. Although Islamabad has denied any links with the militants, Pakistan has been left sidelined and isolated by the circumstances. This change in its policy towards Afghanistan reflects Pakistan's decision to open up its options.

Reasons for strategic shift

This strategic shift in policy is due to various factors. Firstly, the rise of Taliban in Afghanistan would affect Pakistan's counterinsurgency efforts in its Northwestern region. There is now a realisation that the peace in Northwestern Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) province and Federally Administrative Tribal Areas (FATA) is not possible without a peaceful settlement in Afghanistan.

This is the stand of the current provincial government in KP led by Awami National Party, a secular Pashtun nationalist political party. According to the chief minister of KP Amir Haider Khan Hoti, stability in KP and FATA is closely linked to stability in Afghanistan. Consequently, for its own interest, Pakistan sees the need to assist the US and NATO forces to leave behind a stable Afghanistan post-2014. It is clear that instability would hurt Pakistan more than any country.

Secondly, Pakistan sees the need to improve its image in Afghanistan, having been blamed for the chaos in that country. The Afghan government has stated that attacks on Afghan territory are planned in the tribal areas of Pakistan. However, now that Pakistan is presenting itself as a facilitator by releasing the Afghan Taliban, its positive role in the peace process will gain the trust of the various groups in Afghanistan, including the nationalist Afghan Pashtuns and the Northern Alliance, and improve Islamabad's standing.

Thirdly, the US has been pushing Pakistan to take action against the militants based in FATA on the Pak-Afghan border as it was suspicious of Pakistan's strategy in Afghanistan. The US officials have welcomed the release of the Taliban prisoners and termed it a change in the Pakistani policy which will reduce the trust deficit between Pakistan and the US. More importantly, the US needs Pakistan's role in its exit plan and the country's land routes will be important for security forces and equipment withdrawal.

Lastly, Pakistan is facing a severe energy crisis and can do with an Afghanistan solution. With proper policies in place, Pakistan can benefit from the energy-rich Central Asia. It can also be used as a key trade route between Central Asia, South Asia and China. This has not materialised due to the volatile situation in Afghanistan. Therefore, a stable and peaceful Afghanistan actually serves the interest of Pakistan.

Stabilisation in Afghanistan: way forward

Any settlement in Afghanistan would need the support of all the Afghan people. Otherwise, it would be very difficult to achieve national reconciliation. Traditionally, Afghans have solved their disputes and conflicts through negotiations. Therefore, the Afghans should lead the initiatives for the peace process and reconciliation in their own country.

It is important to understand that the Afghan Taliban perceives themselves as the winner of the decade-long insurgency. As the main demand of the Afghan Taliban is Sharia (Islamic law), it remains to be seen whether the Afghan government and other stakeholders are ready to fulfill this key demand.

The US, Pakistan and Afghanistan should set up a clear strategy for the political settlement in Afghanistan. If all three countries reach a consensus on the political settlement in Afghanistan, it could be the basis for a "Peace Process Roadmap to 2015". However, there remains the need to take all the regional stakeholders into confidence.

The US wants a safe exit from Afghanistan and Pakistan needs stability on its western border. All this could be achieved with a final peaceful settlement in Afghanistan. Thus, peace and stability in Afghanistan is in the best interest of all three countries. By releasing the Afghan Taliban prisoners, Pakistan is demonstrating its sincerity in its efforts to bring about the endgame in Afghanistan. It also allows Pakistan to regain the trust of the Afghan government, Afghan people and the international community.

Arshad Ali is a Research Analyst at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University.