



Seeking a managed exit

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Highlights

- Afghanistan President Ashraf Ghani was in New Delhi on September 19 for a day-long working visit.
- Presumably, Prime Minister Narendra Modi took up the issue of seven engineers working for KEC International who remain missing after being kidnapped this May, and Mr. Ghani would have assured him about Kabul's sincere efforts to rescue them.
- Pro forma references to the Strategic Partnership and the New Development Partnership were made but there were no new announcements.
- India reiterated its support for 'an Afghan-led, Afghan-owned and Afghan-controlled peace and reconciliation process' with the Taliban though it is clear that the strings are being manipulated from other capitals.
- A year after U.S. President Donald Trump unveiled his new Afghanistan policy, the stalemate continues.
- All key players, including the U.S., have now opened their own communication lines with the Taliban.

Pakistan dependency

- The objectives of the U.S. policy announced last year were to break the military stalemate on the ground by expanding both the presence and the role of the U.S. and NATO forces in Afghanistan.
- Operational constraints in terms of calling for surveillance and air support were eased.
- The Obama approach of announcing timelines for withdrawing U.S. troops from Afghanistan was replaced by a conditions-based approach.
- Pakistan was put on notice with Mr. Trump tweeting about Pakistan's duplicity in being "a non-NATO ally" and providing safe haven to insurgent groups.
- Earlier this month, the U.S. announced that it was cancelling \$300 million in military aid to Pakistan.
- However, it is clear that U.S.'s Pakistan policy, which has oscillated for 17 years between cajoling using pay-offs and punishing by withholding or cancelling pay-offs, has once again failed to change Pakistan's behaviour.
- The Pakistani military and the ISI do not support the idea of a territorially united, peaceful and stable Afghanistan, never mind the public statements at international conferences.
At the same time, the ISI is unlikely to support the idea of a complete Taliban takeover in Afghanistan.
- The U.S. is unable to get out of this bind as long as it maintains a significant military presence in Afghanistan and therefore remains dependent on communication and supply routes through Pakistan.

- Pakistan on the list of 'state sponsors of terrorism'.
- The U.S.'s dependence provides the security establishment in Pakistan a degree of influence in the corridors of power in Washington that has enabled it to receive over \$33 billion over the last 17 years, despite the ups and downs in what can only be described as an unhappy marriage that neither side is able to terminate.

End game in Afghanistan

- The U.S. appears to be seeking a managed exit, leaving after a successfully conducted election so that the blood (2,400 U.S. lives) and treasure (nearly \$1 trillion) can be justified as having delivered an honourable outcome.
- For the outcome to last, at least for some time, the insurgency needs to be curbed.
- Having failed to defeat it through kinetic means, the U.S. opened direct talks with the Taliban two months ago.
- The first round in July, in Qatar, with State Department senior official Alice Wells was preliminary.
- The talks were explained as intended to judge if the Taliban is serious and thereby 'facilitate' direct talks with the Afghan government.
- It has also expressed concern about the growing presence of the IS.
- Last week, the Taliban made it clear that its demands include release of Taliban prisoners held in U.S. custody and a closure of U.S. bases in Afghanistan.
- With the appointment of former U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan Zalmay Khalilzad as Special Adviser, talks with the Taliban are likely to intensify.
- Both Russia and Iran believe that notwithstanding the ideological affinity, turf battles will ensure that the Taliban will resent the Arab-dominated IS.
- With U.S. encouragement, Uzbekistan has also entertained senior Taliban leaders in Tashkent to persuade them to engage in talks with Kabul.
- Concerned about Uighur militants, China is planning to train and equip an Afghan brigade to be deployed in Badakshan even as it seeks Taliban help in securing its China-Pakistan Economic Corridor projects.
- This has given the Taliban a new legitimacy — exactly as Pakistan had wanted.
- With the emergence of the IS, a distinction between good Taliban and bad Taliban is no longer necessary.

Conclusion

- Realising that the end game is approaching, the Taliban too has changed tack.
- In the areas under its control, instead of destroying the schools, clinics and courts, it is running them by co-opting or replacing local officials who remain on the government's payroll.
- It realises that it needs to emerge from being a shadowy underground insurgency and demonstrate governance skills.