Promising Signs for the Endgame in Afghanistan

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In recent days some propitious developments have taken place which bode well for the peace and stability in the post-NATO Afghanistan. As the date for withdrawal of US and ISAF forces was drawing close the peace process to establish a post war dispensation in Afghanistan seemed to be completely bogged down. The American strategy of ‘fight and talk’ with the Taliban failed to yield satisfactory results and the efforts by the Karzai government to engage in direct talks with Taliban representatives also did not make any headway. The US Presidential elections also created some uncertainty with lingering doubts about the continuation of the Obama plan of withdrawal in case of a change of guard in the White House.

President Obama’s election victory has removed the uncertainty about the future direction of US policy and we might see a renewed effort on part of the US administration to give some impetus to the stalled peace process. On the other hand there has been a significant development at the regional level as a consequence of the visit of a high-powered Afghan delegation to neighboring Pakistan recognised as a key player in enabling the peace process. The Afghan delegation was led by Salahuddin Rabbani the head of Afghanistan’s High Peace Council. Rabbani was able to secure the release of nine Afghan Taliban held captive in Pakistan including Nooruddin Turabi, a former Justice Minister in the Taliban regime. Rabbani was able to secure the release of nine Afghan Taliban held captive in Pakistan including Nooruddin Turabi, a former Justice Minister in the Taliban regime. However, the issue of the release of Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, one of the senior aides of the Taliban leader Mullah Omer could not be resolved and would probably need further understanding and agreement between the two sides.

The Afghans appear to be upbeat about this development and feel that they have now legitimate interlocutors from the Taliban to negotiate with. It also signifies a positive gesture on part of Pakistan to facilitate the peace process. It might also go some way to reduce the acrimony and trust deficit between Islamabad and Kabul. In the past both the Kabul regime and the US had blamed Pakistan for being unhelpful in moving the peace process forward. Pakistan on its part complained of lack of clarity and in fact an apparent contradiction in the US objectives. Pakistan viewed the US policy of ‘fight and talk’ and its persistent demands on Pakistan to launch an operation against the Haqqani network a strong Taliban ally while asking it to bring the Taliban to the negotiating table. Pakistan on its part continued to voice support for an Afghan led peace process. Any progress in the past was however, stymied by the acute lack of trust between the Pakistani and Afghan leaderships and frequent exchange of mutual recriminations.

However, given the unpredictable nature of the Afghanistan’s internal dynamics and multitude of often conflicting interests of the many domestic and foreign players involved it may be too early and too optimistic to read too much into these developments. It is yet to be seen whether the recently released high profile Taliban leaders are willing to sit across the table with the Karzai government or with the US mediators. The second issue which is yet to be determined is the ability of these recently released Taliban leaders to deliver during the peace talks which will be largely dependent on how much confidence they enjoy with Mullah Omer and how much authority he is willing to delegate to them.
Pakistan is also wary of Karzai’s growing intimacy with India, especially after signing a strategic partnership agreement with that country and his tendency to blame Pakistan for any negative occurrence in Afghanistan. His criticism of Pakistan during an interview with NDTV in India would not be taken very kindly by Pakistan, which views its criticism by any world leader doubly hurtful if it is unleashed during a visit to India. Karzai, though, tried to make amends on his return to Kabul by publicly appreciating release of the imprisoned Taliban leaders by Pakistan. In this regard a meeting between President Karzai and Pakistani Army Chief General Ashfaq Pervez Kayani who was on a visit to Kabul to participate in a tripartite meeting between the US, Pakistani and Afghan military leaders is also an important development. The press reports suggest that the meeting was held in a very ‘cordial’ and ‘frank’ manner.

One has to wait and see how the peace process unfolds and how sustainable it becomes in view of the less than encouraging progress made by similar efforts in the past. It is far too easy for the process to be derailed by a violent incident happening inside Afghanistan. It is also unclear as to how supportive would the Americans be for a settlement between the warring Afghan factions. They would also need to review their current policy of ‘fight and talk’ because that would surely impel the Taliban to fight back and thereby vitiating the atmosphere.

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