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Is Afghanistan's grand illusion of Pakistan over?

August 16, 2015



As Afghanistan gradually realises that there can be no long-term stability in the country as long as Pakistan is involved, the time has come for India to register its solidarity when it would be most appreciated, says former foreign secretary Shyam Saran.

A week is a long time in the new Great Game being played on the Afghan stage. On August 4, the outgoing United States Special Representative for Afghanistan, Dan Feldman, told a Washington audience, 'It is clear that there can be no long-term stability in Afghanistan without Pakistan's support.'

Feldman's statement was based on the judgement that Pakistan, if given the right incentives, could prevail upon the Taliban leadership, mostly present in Pakistan, to enter into peace negotiations with the Afghan government.

On the Afghan side, the US effort was to midwife a 'unity' government, led by President Ashraf Ghani, who believed or was led to believe that conceding a lead role to Pakistan would enhance the prospects of relative peace and economic recovery in his country.

The fact that this approach was being underwritten by both the US and China convinced Ghani that a shift away from India was a worthwhile price to pay.

This was also reflected in Feldman's acknowledgement that US and Chinese actions in Af-Pak were 'not competitive but complementary to our efforts.' No pivot at work here!

The developments that have rapidly followed in the wake of the revelation a couple of weeks ago that the Taliban leader, Mullah Omar, may have died more than two years ago in a Karachi hospital have rudely shaken the assumptions underlying the above Pakistan-centric approach.

One, the silence over Mullah Omar's death and the continued use of the dead man's name for seeking legitimacy for various political moves has eroded Pakistan's already pathetically low credibility and convinced the Afghans, including sections of the Taliban, that their neighbour remains manipulative and is not to be trusted.

Two, the orchestrated succession of its own nominees, Mullah Mansoor as the head of the Taliban and Sirajuddin Haqqani as his deputy, has led to much wider dissension and opposition within the movement than may have been anticipated.

These two Pakistani proteges have a history of violent hostility to India and their inclusion in any political dispensation in Kabul would have been deeply inimical to Indian interests.

Pakistan may be left with a Taliban rump which may be unable to deliver on any Pakistani agenda.

Three, there are now more violent groups seeking space in Afghanistan and this includes the Islamic State, which may be attracting disaffected Taliban as well.

Therefore, Pakistan may not be the puppet master it has led some to believe.

Over the past week, there have been a series of violent terrorist bombings in Afghanistan which have gone beyond the level which could be explained as jockeying for advantage in an eventual political settlement.

It is more likely that these terrorist incidents betray a loss of Pakistani control over its Taliban assets for the reasons mentioned above.

If, for argument's sake, they are deliberate assaults orchestrated by Pakistan, then, however reluctantly, the US and perhaps even the Chinese may have to reassess their assumptions.

In either case, it is unlikely that the Pakistan-brokered peace process, even if resumed, would be seen as a credible road to Afghan stability while bombs continue to maim and kill Afghan citizens.

It is, therefore, no surprise that President Ghani has been compelled to shift position on Pakistan's role, having realized that he may have lost the political gamble he took in reaching out to Pakistan despite the widespread skepticism and hostility of his own people.

The statement he issued on August 10 could have been made by his predecessor, Hamid Karzai, who nursed few illusions about Pakistan's role in Afghanistan.

Ghani said, 'The last few days have shown that suicide bomber training camps and bomb-producing factories, which are killing our people, are as active as before in Pakistan.'

He added, somewhat poignantly, 'We hoped for peace but we are receiving messages of war from Pakistan.' This is a particularly damning indictment coming from a professedly pro-Pakistan leader.

These latest developments also mean that the US script for Afghanistan, which the Chinese supported, is coming unstuck. Will there be another diplomatic offensive to salvage the situation by leaning on Pakistan to rein in the Taliban (which they may be incapable of doing) and persuading Ghani to remain invested in a Pakistan-led political process?

Probably, since the alternative would be to reverse the troop drawdown, and resume anti-insurgency operations -- which is unlikely to find favour with Barack Obama.

The China factor is intriguing. The heightened worries China has over the spread of Islamic extremism into Xinjiang and its diminishing confidence in Pakistan and its Taliban protégés, led it to establish direct and close relations with the Afghan government itself and, it has now been revealed, with the Taliban leadership itself.

A recent Global Times article says that China made certain it obtained assurances from Mullah Omar himself that the Uighur militants would not find support from the Taliban. The article expressed fears that the death of the Taliban leader may lead to a fragmentation of the Taliban leadership and an erosion of earlier assurances.

Perhaps, the Chinese were more keenly aware of Pakistan's precarious control over the Taliban and more prescient in anticipating the fragmentation of the movement which may be unfolding now with all its ramifications.

Pakistan, having convinced the US, China and Ghani that it alone could deliver relative peace and stability in Afghanistan but on its own terms, believed that its room for maneuver vis-a-vis India had expanded.

The Chinese also bolstered this confidence by announcing a \$46 billion investment in the China-Pakistan economic corridor. This had also persuaded Pakistan that the international threshold of tolerance for cross-border terrorism against India may have risen several notches.

Recent incidents in Punjab and Kashmir bear testimony to this changed Pakistani outlook. But now the tide seems to be turning once again.

The exposure of Pakistan's limited and declining influence over a fragmenting Taliban, the loss of credibility vis-a-vis the US and China and, most importantly, the possible loss of Ghani as a reluctant but nevertheless willing accomplice of Pakistan's game plan for Afghanistan, may have made Pakistani triumphalism somewhat premature.

Ghani's belated disillusion with Pakistan and the receding prospect of any viable peace with Taliban may just be the opening India has been waiting for to get back into this latest edition of the Great Game.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi should consider a quick visit to Kabul to register Indian solidarity when it would be most appreciated.