

ICS WEDNESDAY SEMINAR

Speaker: Dr. Zeng Xiangyu

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Topic: Afghan Security Prospects: Dynamics and the Roles of China and India

The United States has announced that the majority of its combatant forces will be removed by the time of the national elections in 2014. However, the US will not quit completely, and has reinstated that it will maintain 'a long-term presence' there. It is argued that the US is creating a flexible deployability in Afghanistan. It is in the interest of the US to shift focus from hard battle to strategic deployment. It has maintained that it needs only one base next to Kabul. However, Hamid Karzai has stated that the US has requested nine bases, across Afghanistan: from Kabul, Kandahar to Herat. A proper security related bilateral is yet to be signed. There is a very severe quarrel on the same. The US has stated that if the bilateral is not signed in a short period of time, it will be forced to choose zero deployment. These, are seen as mere rhetoric. In other words, as Washington prepares its exit strategy, the future of the internal stability of Afghanistan looks precarious. Firstly, the performance of Afghan National Security Force under the Karzai government seems to be less-than-satisfactory, especially in the face of the resilient Taliban. In other words, the Karzai-led government may not survive the pullout of the US forces.

In the face of this threat, Karzai resorts to international cooperation. He implores for security help from India, China, Russia and other countries. China and India could play crucial roles here. Delhi, meanwhile, remains prudent in its response. It promises economic and infrastructural assistance and armaments like tanks, helicopters but not troops or arms. In this scenario, China needs to be involved but not militarily. These negotiations are important in the context of fact that even though US is touting for zero deployment in the coming years, but Karzai claims, that in reality, it wants to retain at least nine bases.

The next aspect that was under discussion was the nature of the tentative engagement that the US had developed with the Taliban. In 2011, the US requested the United Nations Security Council to delist fourteen former Taliban from its sanction list, in a bid to induce talks on a peace deal in Afghanistan. Months later, the US Vice President, Joe Biden stated, in different occasions, that Taliban was not the enemy per se, as against Al Qaeda. These steps can be seen as ways of engaging with the Afghan militia which could be crucial in establishing peace. The row over Taliban's Doha office raising the Afghan flag, which upset Karzai, has not upset their intent to resume talks over their future in Afghanistan. Simultaneously, the US maintains that it will not allow Afghan terror to threaten other countries, and is keen on exchange of captives and prisoners. These events show that the ground is being laid for a dialogue to be established which will be critical for Afghanistan's future. The impending elections, that are to happen in Kabul in 2014, are also becoming interesting. Will this be a, election war for three doctors? The three candidates are Abdullah Abdullah, Zalai R Assoul and Ashraf Ghani Ahmadzai, the elder brother of Hamid Karzai. Ahmadzai is perceived as a Taliban hardliners while the rest are seen as soft supporters. However, no one knows what will happen after the election. None of the candidates show any substantial vision for the reconstruction and reconciliation efforts. As of November 2013, 7532 members of the Taliban have surrendered. Another important aspect of security issues here is the prospects of peace talks. Kabul has shown interest in establishing talks with Taliban, but Taliban has expressed no interest. Karzai has issued several statements saying that there were talks, but the Taliban leadership has refused all these claims. As of today, there are better prospects of tentative Taliban-US

talks rather than Taliban-Kabul talks.

The Afghanistan National Security Force (ANSF) is a mixture of progress in installments. There are 350,000 task forces in all, which effectively covers 1.2 percent of the Afghan population. The security outfit receives international assistance in terms of training in US academies, from NATO and even from India. So, there is progress but challenges are huge. First, there is a problem of loyalty among the security force. It suffers from high desertion rate in the personnel (about 26 percent according to the NATO and 10-15 percent according to the Afghan defense ministry) and strong infiltration of armed dissenters. Only yesterday, 20 soldiers were killed and another twenty were abducted by the Taliban in the Kunar province. There is also a strong wave of anti-Americanism. The army is also marked with a significant ethnic divide: between Pashtuns and Tajiks. There is a skewed representation of these communities in the forces: 45 percent of the population is Pashtun, but their presence in the army is 30 percent. The ratio is more skewed at the level of commanders. There has to be some consequences for this imbalance. The Pashtuns sense this marginalization in the hands of the Tajiks. This imbalance might shape into an actual ethnic conflict, and this situation will not be productive for Afghanistan.

The next point is about military expenditure. Afghanistan is a very poor republic but the expense on the military is immense. The manpower of the forces is very low: a mere 1.2 percent of the population. The annual expenditure of the force is 6.6 million USD over 350,000 troops. Who will bear the expenses when the US military leaves? The next point of discussion is about the local warlordism that is rampant in the country. The Afghan National Army was criticized for being a tool of the Northern Alliance. There are warlords who are recruiting former Mujahideens into their factions, and also to form a National Mujahideen Council. If this trend continues there will be another threat to the Afghan military, as an alternate military force. This statement was condemned by the national parties, but it shows what is at danger here. In all, the security situation seems precarious with the coming elections and the imminent American exit deployment.

The Talibans, in between all this, still remain barbaric. They have become more aggressive and more vibrant and as estimated by the United Nations, there have not been many desertions either: about 25-35,000 combatants in early 2010, and minimum 8,000 defectors in late 2012, and about 17-27,000 at present. There are, however, signs of popular uprisings against it, especially in Nuristan and Laghman provinces. These conflicts break out over schools and clinics amongst village residents. These conflicts arise from a growing distrust against the Taliban and it might be too soon to call them 'uprisings'. These local reactions are supported by the ANSF and the local police, like in the Nangarhar uprising in February 2014. These events could spell good news for Kabul, but it must not be forgotten that the popular 'uprisings' are, many a times, as much against Kabul and the ANSF, as against Taliban.

The Taliban today is using asymmetric tactics and improvised explosive devices. They are heavily invested in targeted killings and offensive hard battles are on the rise, as evident in the spring offensive of 2014 and the attack on two army outposts which resulted in the death of 132 ANSF officers in 2013. As far as peace talks are concerned, the group refuses to talk to Kabul and the US simultaneously, thus causing fissures between Kabul and Washington. Even as hard battles are on the rise, chances of these conflicts turning more violent remain high after the US withdraws. The upcoming elections in 2014 have added another burden as far as security issues are concerned. Even as Karzai remains a hardliner against the Taliban, ethnic and factional conflicts are on the rise.

With all this stated however, the final conclusion that can be drawn is that even as security threats pile up, chances of regime collapse of the government remains low. The public acceptance of ANSF is better than the NATO-assisted International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), mostly because the former consists of Afghans. The Taliban may opt for hard battles and organized operations, but it is basically trained, in guerilla warfare. Having seen all these issues, the main stay of the scenario as of now, if Kabul fails, the US will come back into the mainframe of governance.

As far as Indian and Chinese participation is concerned, there are currently 300 Chinese nationals working in seven provinces as of today. There are 4000 Indian nationals working in Afghanistan, as of 2009. India regards Taliban as fundamentally anti-India. This is the main reason India remains suspicious of investing economically even though there is a certain political will to help, especially in building infrastructure and training of personnel. This will is shared by Chinese corporations too.

The questions put forth were on areas like Chinese policy towards Taliban, the change in the US position vis-a-vis Taliban and the prospects of mining near Amu Darya. It was argued that for China, terrorism in Afghanistan is not just a matter of annoyance, but something akin to a threat. It is definitely not ready for military involvement in the country until China is able to distinguish between the Al Qaeda from the Taliban. If after 2014 elections, the country becomes a Sharia state, it would be likely that Afghanistan becomes a problem for both India and China.

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