

Stabilizing Afghanistan: Agenda – 2015

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Abstract

Stable Afghanistan, is still a distant dream, well after 12 years since ruling Taliban were dislodged, post 9/11. The US led foreign forces operating in Afghanistan has managed barely to bring fragile-peace that too at the huge cost in terms of personnel, finance and prestige. Pakistan was initially viewed as a reliable partner due to geo-strategic and professional reasons. Few years later, however Pakistan was accused of playing 'double game' and held responsible for undermining the 'war on terrorism' by supporting significant section of Afghan Taliban and other terrorist groups. The US, in particular went to the extent of castigating Islamabad openly; and brought to bear significant financial and diplomatic pressure to shun the 'double game'. The current initiative named "Peace Process Roadmap 2015" nevertheless once again accords primacy to Pakistan in arranging direct peace talks for a coalition government in Kabul. This paper critically analyses "Peace Process Roadmap 2015" and argues that it has a better potential to succeed in prevailing socio-political environ in Afghanistan, in view of consistent policy failures that we have been witnessing since 2005.

Keywords: Afghanistan, Roadmap 2015, Pakistan, and Prospects for Peace.

Introduction

Realistically speaking, the States accord more primacy to security/survival than to spreading democratic values and institutions. The US by backing the "Peace Process Roadmap 2015" is traversing most pragmatic way out from Afghanistan. The US is doing so, knowing full well that giving primacy to Islamabad in arranging direct peace talks for a coalition government in Kabul can undercut democratic project in Afghanistan and has potential to perpetuate Islamabad's strategic position in the region. This perhaps is the best possible alternatives; than to embracing Afghanistan, overtly controlled by Taliban and/or al-Qaida forces. This is not to suggest that peace efforts led by Pakistan erases possibility of shelter being provided for anti-Western elements; but at least, it would provide an indirect and comparatively effective device for the US, by which it can coerce Islamabad to ensure effective

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supervision over them. Moreover, Pakistan is the only regional ally who can do the job, with some degree of certainty on account of its historic and military ties with them, which are decades old. This would also provide an immediate justification for withdrawing US forces as scheduled and can produce a coalition of political forces that matter in Afghanistan without which neither the US nor the rest of the world, even barely feel assured that Afghanistan would not fallback into the age of late 1990s.

The first section of the paper outlines details of “Peace Process Roadmap 2015” (the Roadmap, henceforth). The skeptical voices are considered and rebutted in the second. A case is made out favoring the Roadmap in the third and concluding remarks are laid out in the fourth.

The Peace Process Roadmap 2015

The Roadmap is an ambitious new peace initiative where Pakistan would play leading role in arranging direct talks between the warring sides; and the Taliban may also be granted government positions in the areas under its control – considered to be the strongholds. This latest initiative envisions ending the war by 2015, as the title suggests, through a ceasefire and negotiations in this year (2013) most likely in Saudi Arabia. Pakistan destined to play critical role of selecting the leaders of the Taliban and of other groups who would take part in the negotiations with Afghan government. According to the script, the peace effort is to be conducted “through one consistent and coherent channel”. It also provides the insurgents a voice on thorny issues like “withdrawal” of the US led NATO force by 2014. The Roadmap anticipates that the US would work with Kabul and Islamabad on matter as to which insurgent leader takes part in negotiation. Concomitantly, the US would also ensure removal of the insurgent negotiators from the UN list of terrorists. The Roadmap reportedly represents a decision by Karzai in coordination with Pakistan to assume the lead in peace-making efforts, following the collapse of earlier bid of Obama Administration to persuade the Taliban to participate in direct talks. This latest Peace Roadmap officially though is the work of Afghanistan’s ‘High Peace Council’ responsible for organizing government peace efforts. In a nut shell, Pakistan is in the drivers’ seat, moderate Taliban as partners in peace, Afghanistan is consentor of the process, the US playing a facilitator and Saudi Arabia is the host. These actors would perform scripted role to bring about a workable political coalition by 2015 which may put the country back on track of a long awaited season of normalcy, peace and development.

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The skeptical voices

The most prominent skeptical voice about viability of the Roadmap concerns with the primacy accorded to Pakistan. The bone of contention is - that Pakistan has all along been an ambiguous ally on the road to stable and peaceful Afghanistan (Chayes 2012) post 9/11. This skeptical however ignores Pakistan's security/survival question in anarchic international system where there is no common command to enforce stability from above. The immediate compelling reason why Pakistan should play big role is that no other state can, at the moment, has the leverage over assertive Taliban & Co. A bitter fact is Pakistan is grooming non-state entities and tag mark them as "strategic assets" and been successful in putting tactical pressure on its arch rival –India. In fact, the US has seemingly learned the hard way, a long established fact: Pakistan never really abandoned "strategic assets" and Afghanistan has always been alternate ground to feed, train and shelter them (Bajoria & Kaplan 2011). Moreover, the experience post 9/11, has amicably demonstrated that foreign force alone can hardly stabilize Afghanistan, unless assisted by some regional ally who can bring what foreign forces do not have – critical human-fed intelligence on enemy movements, for instance. Pakistan perfectly fits the bill and as in the past, can produce desirable result. In return however, it expects some geopolitical concessions - from the US, in particular. The West also realizes that it cannot hold Afghanistan anymore, for the world opinion is turning against it. Pakistan still has the reason and leverage and is willing to offer help. In exchange however expects that the US, in particular, support its geopolitics. Pakistan gains something being in drivers' seat and the West also benefits some way. This is a spoil-sport where the players are gainer and the Roadmap 2015 is a thoughtfully crafted game-plan whereby all player intending to save the face and get out of Afghanistan, as quickly as possible.

Skeptics also express the fear as to what majority of Afghans feel about the Roadmap 2015, backed by a neighboring country (Pakistan) who considers Afghanistan a de-facto and de-jure "strategic depth" (Haider 2011) and has reduced it to no more than a functioning sanctuary for 'favored' militants. This skeptical is fair enough and justifiable, but lacks sense of statecraft. The recent past certainly validates the skeptical and needs to be attended to. Yet, the sizable section of governing elites in Afghanistan do sympathize with, and will support Pakistan backed peace effort, because having Islamabad on board is no longer an alternative. Moreover, Afghans - both ordinary and elites - do understand that it was Pakistan who had provided refuge for millions of Afghans in the hour of need and allowed them to stay on its territory at the expense of putting huge strain on systemic and financial resources (UNHCR 2013). Besides, Taliban still controls considerable territory and do enjoy

popular support, whether we accept or not. Had this been untrue, the foreign forces would have defeated Taliban and stability brought back by now. Therefore the prudent way would be to tell Islamabad in no uncertain terms that it would have to remain attentive to Afghanistan's peculiarities and must preserve its territorial integrity and respect sovereignty. Pakistan should also be asked to rein on its military establishment, its intelligence gathering machinery - the ISI, and not disturb or undermine political stability there. The much desired road to peaceful Afghanistan snakes through Pakistan is a fact that we all need to digest. The Peace Roadmap 2015 is just a realist attempt to accept it and move on.

Furthermore, the skeptics believe that geopolitical rivalry between India and Pakistan may further intensify - a proxy battle on Afghan soil and elsewhere (Chalk & Hanauer 2012). It is nevertheless, a symptom of historical counterclaims between the two neighbors and surrounds geographical ambition - Afghanistan figures in this respect as a consequence, not the primary breeder of rivalry. Hence so long as ground-reality remains unaltered, which has been fostering enmity, the ongoing rivalry between the two would continue. And we shouldn't connect Afghan stability and geopolitical rivalry between the two beyond a point; because even if stability comes to Afghanistan, the rivalry neither evaporates nor ceases to exist, given their unchanging nature of fundamental positions. Moreover geopolitical rivalry between the two surfaced in Afghanistan due to lack of socio-political instability there. As Afghanistan come closing on instability within its border, Delhi and Islamabad would have to bow-down to reality and re-design geopolitical maneuver. In fact, it is ethnically divided, politically vulnerable and economically weak Afghanistan that they have exploited to the maximum extent possible, and reduced it to nothing more but geo-strategic battleground. The US, in particular, therefore would have to put diplomatic & economic pressure on both of them to kick-off negotiations on bilateral issues, including resolution on Kashmir. The Roadmap 2015 ought to be pressed on, because total regional consensus is neither necessary nor desirable. If history is the teacher, we know that Delhi and Islamabad wouldn't easily forgo geopolitics. Besides, Pakistan is bound to get more preference in any effort aimed at bringing stability to Afghanistan than India. Simply because Pakistan is its immediate neighbor not merely sharing geographic border alone, but sharing inseparable ethno-cultural ties (Siddique 2012). It was Pakistan, as a consequence who has suffered immensely – politically, financially and strategically and there is hardly any comparable example in the region.

Additionally, the skeptics conclude that the Roadmap 2015 is bound to fail, because "it is not based on anything that the Taliban has given us reason to expect" and most likely fan "an all-out civil war" (Hilaly 2012). Actually, this

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fear emanates more from inadequate understanding of who Taliban are and the constitutive nature of Afghan society. Talibanization is now an intriguing, and perhaps irreversible characteristic of Afghan society (Jonson & Mason 2007). Physiologically speaking, Talibanization is so entrenched that ordinary Afghans imbibe it without knowing and their appearance is identical: attire, mustache, head cover, manners, and choice of words of ordinary Afghans and Taliban have melted together. Even the children did not escape this melting pot and imitating adults. More notably, the women flock too has not only adopted Taliban preferred distinctive attire but have been playing the role of 'carriers' and are responsible for entrenching the phenomenon. In fact, Taliban's hold on Afghan society is nowhere more pronounced than on bodies of women (Amnesty International). This is perhaps an unintended side-effect of decade's old strategic amalgamation of militant religiosity with political opportunism, abetted by the West during Soviet occupation of the country. Talibanization is not just confined to physiology but extends to thought, thought process, attitudes, likes & dislikes, learning preferences. The cumulative effects of which can be felt throughout the social spectrum. Moreover, Taliban is not just a name, connected with some loosely defined group of fanatics, but has long become a life-style and has a dynamic of its own. Irrespective whether Taliban returns or becomes some part of future political formation, physiological and ideological strands of Talibanization would dominate the future of Afghans, whether we like it or hate it. So the imperative at moment is to grasp ever entrenching culture called Taliban; and co-opt its moderate variety by making them a part of future political formation intending to govern Afghanistan. It is the moderate variety in Taliban, which would certainly give reason to expect that the Roadmap 2015 can succeed.

Finally, the fear is that co-opting Taliban would fan "an all-out civil war". But misses a point of reality – warring ethnic factions in Afghanistan can forge peace, if given an opportunity to do so. The fear of civil war getting louder and wider implies that the factions like Northern Alliance wouldn't take it lying down and eventually challenge Taliban with means available. Further, as in the past, the neighbors - Iran and India - in particular may not necessarily cease supporting Northern Alliance and could hasten both military and strategic support to it, which could make an all out civil war more louder and deeper. Besides, Taliban is not a homogeneous social entity and has within it, different factions that compete for dominance. Once the NATO forces leave Afghanistan, different factions can jeopardize prospects of peace. This analysis is indeed certifiable; but it should not hold us back from initiating fresh and realistic peace efforts to bring Afghanistan back on track. The anti-Taliban Northern Alliance is not as big a challenge as being thought to be. Northern Alliance is not a state within a state; but the external support it receives makes it to be. Once support and supply dries up, the Northern Alliance would bit the

bullet of reality. Besides, the Roadmap 2015 is precisely created to sort out differences between and among various ethnic factions, including Northern Alliance and hammer out an acceptable roadmap to peace, sans foreign meddling. Given all these circumstantial facts, the Peace Process Roadmap 2015, perhaps is the last good chance to salvage Afghanistan.

The Argument Favoring Roadmap 2015

The Roadmap 2015 envisions peaceful and stable Afghanistan that its neighbors and the West can do business with. This is not however meant giving any of its neighbors, a license to trump its internal affairs, at will. Therefore the Roadmap 2015 must be given a fair chance to turn things around. The Roadmap, according to what is available in public domain, is an attempt to pull regional players together and utilize their expertise, aimed at an Afghanistan sans return of militant Taliban to corridors of powers in Kabul or elsewhere in the country. The Roadmap may be extraordinarily vocal on Pakistan's role; but it surely expects other regional players to play supporting role. So as to help consolidate the gains that the West has managed to bag so far. Moreover, peaceful Afghanistan requires concerted effort and as such, some are bound to get more assertive role. The Roadmap 2015 is a realistic last chance of pulling Afghanistan out of chaos and destruction. Besides, it was conceptualized by Afghan themselves and based on legitimate regional compulsions and as such, cannot be expected to please all, and forever. The viable compromise, and prioritizing something over the other, is a part and parcel, of the exercise and Afghanistan is a unique case requiring unique effort to overcome the difficulties that plague it. In addition, the neighbors have often expressed desire to see Afghanistan stabilized, as fast as possible and offered requisite assistance. Of course, India wishes to see a political formation, sans Taliban's even slightest touch to it; whereas Pakistan certainly likes to see a compromise on that aspect. But both Delhi and Islamabad can and should be persuaded to come around the Roadmap 2015 and if not shun but considerably toe-down its "me-too" attitude. This is a high time that regional big brothers namely Delhi and Islamabad become pragmatic and play a pause on geopolitics in the name of national interest; and allow Afghanistan forge a workable peace and begin a fresh journey. There is indeed no other way but to take all significant voices on board while forging a political alliance and this of course, include Taliban and Northern Alliance, some way or the other.

Furthermore, the Roadmap 2015 may succeed because it is pregnant with seeds that potentially bring peace in Afghanistan as well as in the wider region. Afghanistan some way or the other, has been connected with ongoing conflicts in the region, namely Kashmir, and disturbed tribal areas of Pakistan.

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Therefore it is argued that stable Afghanistan is imperative to create conducive conditions for negotiations, aimed at resolution and/or management of regional conflicts. Afghanistan has long emerged the shelter of religions extremists and has effectively been converted into a laboratory of mixing religious fervor with geopolitics, symbolized by titles like Al-Qaida and Taliban. Moreover, it is the only sanctuary available, as of now, for training and doctoring the body & soul of would be suicide bombers, impatient to go to supposed paradise by killing fellow human beings on excuse of some perceived harm being caused to Islam/Muslims. The religious extremists/fundamentalists sheltered in Afghanistan have been campaigning Kashmir cause, besides creating difficulties for Government of Pakistan in running border provinces of NWFP and Waziristan. If somehow peace and stability is bought to stay in Afghanistan, these extremists might face significant hurdles, and would also face increasing difficulty in attracting youths to their enterprise. It is an established fact that the extremists groups based on Afghan soil have been involved in Kashmir and fighting Indian security forces there. The Roadmap apparently takes into consideration presence of such extremists and intends to co-opt moderate forces present among them. This perhaps is most effective way to move forward to bring about semblance of normalcy in Afghanistan and rescue stability there; which most certainly would have a domino effect throughout the region.

The Roadmap could also be a better way to embroil the West in general and the US in particular, in rebuilding Afghanistan, in more meaningful way than is the case, so far. The West has been crying hoer over its long-term commitment to stabilize/rebuild Afghanistan and it is because of such rhetoric that they got themselves into difficult business of building Afghanistan with top-down approach; and soon realized that stabilizing the country is not a cake walk and getting support from the regional plays, namely Pakistan and India is extremely vital. The way Roadmap conceives its actors, processes and paths, is indeed appreciable because it rightly, pins-down a bitter fact - that the outsiders should not assign themselves larger than life role in rebuilding the country; rather allow the neighbors to take the lead and the “coalition of the willing” can play the facilitator. Such facilitation ought to wear substantial financial and political commitment by the West, and that too with sufficient endorsement from the UN and other Non-governmental Organizations/agencies. Corruption, misuse of assistant fund has marred the progress disproportionately and the Karzai government is turned out to be no better than the previous regime. Socio-political chaos remained entrenched and propelled corrupt warlords to the positions of power which in tuned led to popular disenchantment with anything associated with West backed government. The Roadmap can potentially put end to all this and restore good governance and win back popular support since it will not be a business as

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usual, because all factions would be a part of governing coalition. Both majority Pashtun and minority Tajik, Hazars and Uzbeks would partner power and responsibility for turning things around - positively and constructively. The international community must grab this opportunity and bring Afghanistan back on track if they wish to meaningfully curb spread of disturbances in our world. As we have learnt the hard way - Afghanistan can't be normalized without involving moderate Taliban. We should also appreciate the reality that without Islamabad supporting and playing decisive role Afghanistan hardly function as normal political society. The Roadmap merely acknowledges and accepts that reality and urges a movement forward.

The US and its allies invaded Afghanistan to dismantle and/or destroy Al-Qaida which had allegedly masterminded 9/11, has been completely routed, including its top leader Osama Bin Laden. Now it is time for the US led forces to leave Afghanistan as early as possible but remain committal to reconstruction and consolidation efforts there. Taliban is a distinct cultural-political entity which needs to be co-opted for bringing normalcy in the country. Of course, there is sizeable section of Taliban which is targeting Western and Afghan government interest; chiefly because, for them, outsiders are there to bully Afghans and rob them of their honor and dignity, besides being a bolt on Islamic resurgence. Major part of Taliban however is moderate and can be persuaded to abjure violence and join mainstream political process. Once outside forces leave Afghanistan, even the extremists among Taliban would find isolated and may well return to home and contribute to peace. Yes, things could go wrong, and political normalization can suffer setbacks but that should not however prevent us from offering disgruntled elements a genuine excuse to return to the mainstream. First and foremost, we need to put before Afghans a sincere and transparent peace plan which would take all shades on board to move toward inclusive cohabitation. The Roadmap 2015 is precisely that peace plan and all the stakeholders must make it work and give peace a chance.

In this respect, we must distinguish between Al-Qaida and Taliban. Both are not one and the same but represent different living and also prefer dissimilar ways and means for. The West has misunderstood this crucial distinction and invaded Afghanistan and vowed to destroy both of them. Now we all know, Taliban is very much alive giving countless nightmares to the forces operating in the country. In fact, presence of foreign forces in Afghanistan has given Taliban a much needed lease of life because it gave them huge success in recruiting fighters even as far away as from Europe. Al-Qaida is defeated because it was never enjoyed popular support from ordinary followers of Islam; but Taliban is not Al-Qaida. Taliban is essentially a cultural movement which aims for religious revival and resurrection and do enjoy sympathy from

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ordinary people. This is fact whether we like it or hate it. Of course, this movement has been infiltrated by extremists but this is neither unique to Taliban nor surprising. All cultural movements have suffered this fate – Hindu, Christian and Jews. We instead have believed and continue to believe that Taliban itself is yet another extremist variety of Islam. The reality is it is a lose movement urging followers to follow religion as expected by the Holy books. Majority of the followers of Islam, any way have ignored its call, but did not however, as in the past, distance themselves from - in Afghanistan and elsewhere. Moreover, we shouldn't overlook the fact that it was the West who radicalized Taliban and armed and trained them to take on Soviets in late 1980s. Once Soviets were defeated, the West turned its back on them – the root cause for Afghanistan's contemporary quagmire. The Roadmap 2015 is the first peace plan that acknowledges and intends to correct that error. Taliban has to be an integral part of any political process that aims at peace and stability in Afghanistan.

Lastly, the Roadmap 2015 could well be a turning point in our effort to combat terrorism globally. Injustice inflicted upon Muslims in several parts of the world is one of the major causes that drive terrorism. The Roadmap 2015 has the potential to succeed, if implemented sincerely, which would offer one less reason for terrorist. Moreover, Jihadist would also find it a little harder to rope in new foot soldiers to their exacerbated cause of Jihad, which is going nowhere. In fact, it would not move anywhere because it is merely an idea to combat wrongs being committed by bad souls, sans any workable strategy. Everyone knows that if jihadists could not bring about Islamic state in Afghanistan, their clones would never be able to do so elsewhere. That Afghanistan has not become Islamic state the way Al-Qaida wanted it to be, is real defeat of the Jihadists and/or Al-Qaida. If Afghanistan becomes peaceful with active involvement of Taliban there, it would enhance acceptability for Islamic oriented parties around the world. This would hurl a new era perhaps in Islam's relations with the Western world. The West and Islam need to find a common cause to live together in peace and develop avenues for cooperation. Further Taliban can also play mediator in conflicts elsewhere involving the West and Muslim countries. For all this to happen, the Roadmap 2015 must win enough support both from Afghans and from the world community. Taliban has now a huge opportunity to prove the critics wrong by sincerely accepting the terms and conditions of the same and shun violence as a mean to achieve its goals.

Concluding Remarks

The Roadmap 2015 is a constructive effort of the major stakeholders to bring battered Afghanistan back on track, with international community standing firm

by its side. Of course, there are risks involved and Roadmap can go astray. The risk chiefly emanates from external geopolitical environment, as has been the case from last four decades, if not more. Afghanistan's immediate neighbor Pakistan can once more play spoil sport in the name of strategic interest and can potentially derail Roadmap 2015. It may again galvanize, arm and train some section of Taliban for strategic purposes – Kashmir dispute for instance, which would produce undesirable strains on Afghanistan because politically radicalized Taliban surely attempt to influence politics there. Islamabad must move away from any such move, simply because the non-state entities like politicized Taliban would hardly bring tangible strategic gains in the long run. History of last six decades testifies this. There are almost no gains that have accrued to Islamabad, exclusively as a result of its patronizing policy. Moreover, patronized non-state entities have in fact, made Islamabad's strategic posture more vulnerable and have destabilized its resource rich areas bordering Afghanistan, besides propelling huge law and order problem elsewhere in the country. Sooner Islamabad realizes limits of using patronized non-state actors, better would be the gains for it – political, strategic and economic. Furthermore, this would discourage its arch rival India to chase Pakistan on Afghan soil and bring immediate relief for Afghans.

The second external geopolitical element posing risk to Roadmap 2015 is the US itself. The US in particular is very peculiar variable which sees nothing but so called national interest and could well abandon Afghanistan all together, as it did in the past, once Soviets were defeated in 1989. Yes, the US seems to be rather serious this time, but this can change any moment, as geopolitics/geo-economics move to the Middle East/West Asia. The US' decision of leaving back sizable combat troops in Afghanistan after 2014 is something re-assuring but this has to be adequately explained to Afghans and its neighbor – Pakistan and Iran in particular. Any hasty and arrogant behavior by the US on this count can put the whole Roadmap 2015 in jeopardy. The US also needs to ensure a steady financial and diplomatic support not just for Afghan security forces but also for reconstruction/rebuilding efforts so as to re-assure the public that old black days of both Northern Alliance and Taliban rule would not be tolerated.

Lastly, a bigger and greater responsibility lies on shoulders of Karzai government and Taliban. Both need to show magnanimity and shun backstabbing, besides being committal to constitutional means to realize their objectives. Divide and rule has been a favored path for several factions to gain/retain relevance to politics. Afghans were deliberately kept apart on ethnic fault lines by the ruling elites that had plunged the whole country in chaos. The Roadmap now demands bridging of divides, particularly between majority Pashtun and minority Hararas, Uzbeks, Tajiks. Former Northern

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Alliance and Taliban need to show maturity by putting aside bickering, animosity and backstabbing for the sake of brighter Afghanistan. If they cannot scarify self-serving interest for Afghanistan, then who will? The Roadmap 2015 should become both symbol and substance of peace, tranquility and prosperity.

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