

Iran's role in Afghanistan after the return of US forces

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In order to understand the Iran's role in Afghanistan after the departure of the US forces, the paper is divided into five sections. The first one, however, deals with the question itself; whether the US withdrawal is likely to happen. The second section presents a recent brief history of the Iran-Afghan relations. The third part focuses on the *why and how* of a possible Taliban return. The fourth and fifth sections shall be on Iran's role in Afghanistan. This part deals with the issue from two different perspectives.

Withdrawal of the US forces: myth or reality

The question of the "US withdrawal of Afghanistan" itself is contentious. Although both US and UK authorities claim that they will pursue a gradual withdrawal in 2012-2015, the likelihood of such action is dubious; they are not very much clear about leaving Afghanistan. Contradictory statements do exist among the Western chiefs.¹ Some believe that the action will be dangerous and risky. Some others do not hope for a complete withdrawal. In this regard, David Cameron, the British Prime Minister, had stated that, "there will be no UK troops in combat roles in Afghanistan by 2015." The statement vividly implies that there will not be a total withdrawal; western involvement in Afghanistan will continue even after 2015, perhaps a nonmilitary engagement. In fact, any reductions of the US or NATO forces, will depend on the circumstances and conditions on the ground.

Whatever, in case of a US withdrawal, however, what will be the role of Iran in Afghanistan? The role of the Islamic Republic of Iran needs to be understood in two different contexts. But, before proceeding, two issues must be taken into consideration. It is advisable to refer first to a recent brief history of Iran-Afghan relations and then to follow the present internal scenario in Afghanistan itself by focusing on the Taliban's likely rise to power.

Iran-Afghan ties: a flashback

The two states for most part of their relations have benefited from close strategic cooperation. In the reconstruction of Afghanistan Iran has been an active player, working on various areas, such as infrastructure, energy, economic, medical, and cultural. However, Afghanistan's ties with the

Islamic Republic of Iran strained when Taliban took over. From the very beginning of the emergence of Taliban, relations with Taliban deteriorated due to number of reasons, such as harsh treatment of Shia and the execution of Iranian diplomats by Taliban. Iran, no doubt, played a key role in the overthrow of Taliban. It has since helped revive Afghanistan's economy and infrastructure. Despite some differences such as Iran's toughened policy on Afghan asylum seekers and the periodic disputes over the water rights of the Helmand River, business boomed up between the two nations since the overthrow of Taliban in 2001. It has been claimed that Iran is considered to be among the first ten top investors in Afghanistan. Of course, the West does not have an optimistic view of such involvement. Many Western politicians believe that Iran is meddling in Afghan issue. But, both Iran and Afghanistan deny such accusation. In his official presentations on Iran, President Karzai time and again has referred to Iran as a "helpful partner." Yet, the question is that the West particularly the US is not positive about Iran's involvement in Afghanistan. They are suspicious of the extent of the Iranian role in the Afghan crisis. The crisis in Afghanistan has forced the NATO to deal with the situation differently; that may promise the return of Taliban.

Likely re-emergence of Taliban

Inside Afghanistan, the present dissatisfaction of the corruption within the current regime and its inability to function in limiting the role of the NATO forces who pledged to restore peace and stability, and the continuing violence in the country that has claimed the lives of thousands of civilians, somewhat reflects the past. This, ultimately, may repeat the old scenario, i.e. return of Taliban to power. Equally important, however, responsible for the likely emergence of Taliban in Afghanistan, is the recent differences between the Afghan president and the US high level officials. On the one hand, the US is pessimistic about the role of Karzai in Afghanistan. On the other hand, Afghan president is criticizing the US role in the country, saying that "the US as an occupying force pursuing her own national interest." ² It seems that the development so far has led the Americans to act independently without having Karzai involved in peace talks with Taliban. Although in the beginning both Karzai's government and the US have been involved in negotiations with Taliban to break with Al-Qaida and work on peaceful purposes, the recent scenario indicates that the US is involved unilaterally. Karzai himself shed lights on the matter. In his recent public confirmation, Afghan president disclosed that the US holding direct talks with Taliban, a development that the US so far hasn't publicly acknowledged.

What has pushed the US into talks with Taliban partly can be because of Iran's important presence in the region and partly because of the US fear of the rise of Al-Qaida in Afghanistan. As far as the latter issue is concerned, the US intelligence needs the support of Pakistan's ISI. The ISI is constantly in contact with the Pak-Taliban. The Pak-Taliban is influential in Afghanistan. Thus, US assist Pak-Taliban through ISI. The negotiations are mainly taking place with the Pak-Taliban or "good Taliban", as it is called so by some Americans. ³ It has been claimed that it was Pak-Taliban or some rogue agents of ISI who informed the US of the whereabouts of Osama Bin Laden. The strategy, however, is to control the Al-Qaida elements in Afghanistan.

Well, backing to the question; Iran's role. The Islamic Republic of Iran, whether a foe or friend of the United States serves a dual purpose as far as the case of Afghanistan is concerned. Iran's role can be both constructive as well as destructive. The role of Iran, however, will be discussed the other way round by focusing first on the Iran's destructive role and then on its constructive role.

Iran's destructive role

An effective role by the Iranians, first and foremost, depends on the stability of the regime itself, and, next, on its international prestige. Iran is facing multifaceted challenges. The western sanctions, economic problems such as unemployment, the ongoing political crisis hitting North Africa and Middle East, the concern with the rightist-leftist clashes that went off in the immediate aftermath of the 2009 presidential elections resulted in the disputed victory of Ahmadinejad, and the current differences between president and leadership highlighted recently, has seriously preoccupied Iran. Hence, an unstable Iran certainly will not be able to play a constructive role in the development of Afghanistan. Yet, an unstable Iran will be capable of playing a destructive role. In this context, Iran will have to keep the Americans busy in Afghanistan. The intention is to divert the NATO's attention off Iran and keep the attention to Afghanistan by making NATO deeply involved in the Afghan crisis. An internationally isolated Iran has been pretty successful in backing conventional warfare and assisting Afghan insurgency against the NATO forces. The Iranian support of Taliban can be noted as a prime example. Although the Shia Iran and the Sunni Taliban are ideologically different and that they have not enjoyed good terms, the post 9/11 has changed the scenario. The US was projected as the common enemy of both Iran and Taliban, making Taliban a friend of Iran; recalling the concept of "the enemy of my enemy is my friend."

The US intelligence officials had declared that the Islamic regime is helping Taliban. Accordingly, Taliban receives both military and financial backup from the Iranians particularly from the revolutionary guard corps both in Iran and Afghanistan. In addition to that, however, Iran has an indirect involvement in the so-called development of Afghanistan, which the US does not like that. Iran has handed over several of its Afghan projects to China, ⁴ mainly because, Iran is neither in the position to export manpower, nor legally can contribute to the reconstruction of Afghanistan, due to the sanctions. Again, in this connection, it is not pretty clear what Iranians are actually doing in Afghanistan. A peaceful Afghanistan under the US control, however, will be dangerous for Iran, as the "attention" will be fully focused on Iran then. Iran will not tolerate a peaceful Afghanistan under the US control.

Therefore, to the US administration, the notorious role of Iran in Afghan crisis cannot be overlooked; the US is forced to change the strategy. It is trying to bypass Iran by winning over Taliban. In doing so, "the US government is into direct and secret talks with senior Taliban leaders." ⁵ On this account, President Karzai, has pointed out that the foreign military and especially the United States itself is going ahead with these negotiations. Apart from that, the western allies are preparing the grounds to officially involve Taliban into negotiations. A major development, in this regard, is the UN Security Council's recent pro-Taliban move. The UN sanctions list for Taliban and Al-Qaida has been figured into two. ⁶ This can legally support Taliban into talks on Afghan crisis. At this writing, however, nothing is certain; the extent of the discussions and negotiations is unclear.

No doubt, the success of the American diplomats in winning over Taliban relies on two major factors, first, understanding well the social psychology of Taliban, and, second, diplomatic efficiency. American success will mean a blow to the Islamic Republic of Iran. Yet, Iran then will have to play with the remaining cards. Iran may remobilize all available Afghan sources against Taliban. The Tajiks, for instance, has never favored a Taliban form of government. However, the successful implementation of the project to a large extent depends upon Iran's power and influence, which is again doubtful, due to Iran's own internal crisis. In any case, even an unstable Iran will be capable of manipulation in Afghanistan, making Afghan progress difficult.

Iran's constructive role

In order to avoid confrontation with Iran as far as the question of Afghanistan is concerned, the West in general and the United States of

America in particular has to count on Iran's part by taking the Islamic Republic extremely serious. Any instability in Iran, whatever, will leave its impacts on its neighbors including Afghanistan. Comparatively speaking, Afghanistan has always enjoyed better relations with Iran than Pakistan. The pre-Taliban takeover and post-Taliban overthrow periods are concrete examples of Afghan-Iran close ties. In infrastructure, economic, construction, cultural, and medical fields, Iran, undoubtedly, like any other western states will be equally useful for the development of Afghan society; the historical records approve of the statement. Perhaps, more than any other state, Iran may play a vital role in preserving the Afghan security. However, to push Iran up to that level, the US has to deal with a herculean task. It has to resume her diplomatic relations with the Islamic Republic of Iran, to ease the economic and political sanctions on Iranian regime particularly on issues such as Iran's nuclear energy, and, more importantly, both should develop a mutual trust and confidence. Under such circumstances only, Iran will be able to play a constructive role in the peace and security of Afghanistan. The United States can broaden Iran's constructive role in Afghanistan. It can engage Iran in the reconstruction of Afghanistan through a new diplomacy. The strategy itself may lead both Iran and US to redefine their relations for good.

Notes

- (1) For more, see the different news, reports, and analysis on "differences over the likely US withdrawal from Afghanistan", which have been discussed, aired, and printed by various sources, such as BBC, CNN, VOA, Aljazeera, and Iran's Press TV (March-July 2011).
- (2) See, the full text on *bloomberg.com* reported by Rupert & Najafizada, "U.S. Confirms Preliminary Afghan Taliban Talks, Karzai Criticizes Motives", (Jun 20, 2011).
- (3) Certain elements in ISI or army are not happy with "Pak-Taliban and US" connection. They want to control Afghanistan on a political basis rather than through extremist links. Moreover, apart from being in contact with Pak-Taliban, the US is also in contact with the Afghan-Taliban.
- (4) Although there are no official or public declarations of such events, according to the local sources (Afghan and Iran border sources, December 2010) whom I interviewed, Chinese are working on some Iranian construction projects in Afghanistan.
- (5) Coll Steve, "US in Secret Talks with Taliban", (Feb. 19, 2011), *businessinsider.com*
- (6) See the full article on *guardian.co.uk* "US in talks with Taliban, says Karzai, Afghan president", Hamid Karzai, confirms US involvement in the peace talks at a news conference in Kabul, 18 June 2011.

