Perceiving Pakistan’s growing centrality to diplomacy in Afghanistan, the West has planned its policy of identification and engagement with the moderate Taliban. But India believes that in war there is no substitute for victory. Therefore, it has reasons to be wary of the idea of a political reconciliation with the Taliban. Crafting peace in Afghanistan requires the US not to overlook Pakistan’s sensitivesness towards Kabul, rather to be more attentive to Indian security concerns vis-à-vis Pakistan. Simply protecting its own interests in the region may not help the US in its mission.

Sanjeeb Mohanty

The Study 9

Negotiating with the Talibans: An Indian perspective

Indian worry

For a variety of reasons, India has cautioned against treating any faction of the Taliban as moderates and rejects the idea of negotiating with them. The Indian government takes the line that anyone subscribing to a fundamentalist ideology cannot be good and fundamentalists must not be called as such. The Taliban are viewed as a reactive force with an anti-modernist ideology. It takes the view that they have made Islam more conservative and have a tremendous capacity for extremism. India believes that a resurgent Taliban means brutal governance, a paralysed economy, denial of basic human rights and international isolation. There are also fears that cultivating moderates could embolden Pakistan to exploit proximity to Taliban.

Second, it is almost impossible to make a distinction between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ Taliban and trying to do so is not only deceptive but also could further complicate the situation in Afghanistan. It is certainly tempting to see the ulterior motives of the Pakistani military establishment.

The US intent behind making such a distinction is a way of ensuring Pakistan cooperation, by accommodating its security concerns in Afghanistan. Even Pakistan’s suspicion about India’s presence in Pakistan has led the US to underplay India’s role in the country.

Furthermore, India is concerned that the search for moderate Taliban could see these elements fall under Pakistan’s influence and control, in turn leading to a helping hand in Afghanistan to fulfill Pakistan’s strategic ambitions in the region and in ensuring effective control over the country. This particular Indian worry stems from the fact that the Afghan insurgency has no broad popular base but is linked to clandestine support from Pakistan. Bringing so-called moderates back into the political process could enhance Pakistan’s influence in Kabul because of control over members of the Taliban leadership, many of whom are members of the Taliban.

Pakistan’s military planners view Afghanistan as a strategic space in the event of a war with India and to control this space they need the help of the Taliban. It is argued that, once Pakistan acquires the strategic depth through these moderate elements of the Taliban and is assured of peace on its western border; it may concentrate its entire energy and attention to the eastern border with India. The US, on the other hand, is concerned that the moderate Taliban group will re-militarize with India’s genuine concerns. India fears that a political deal with any of the elements of Taliban will only strengthen the Pakistani military and the global jihad network. Therefore, the US remains most concerned about the ulterior motives of the Pakistani military establishment.

Overplaying Pakistan’s sensitivesness in the running of Afghanistan would enhance the nuisance capabilities of the US in confronting the military situation there. Pakistan’s dilemma on Afghanistan, therefore, is to be found in the military leadership’s contradictions.

The US war in Afghanistan can only be successful if the Pakistani military’s sanctuaries and sustenance infrastructure for the Afghan Taliban is dismantled. The surge, bribe and run policy adopted by the US is unlikely to buy peace in Afghanistan. Any military surge must be backed by political strategy which would ultimately defeat or render the Taliban irrelevant to the aspirations of the ordinary Afghan people. Quitting is not an option. Obama’s goal, therefore, must be to break the back of the Taliban, significantly redesigning their military capabilities. The US should rather search for a credible Afghan partner having support of the Afghan people, not of these moderate fundamentalists.

Conclusion

A wrong selection for negotiation may reverse the trend in spite of a new winning strategy. Many see the US desperation to reach an agreement with the moderates as a part of its exit plan prior to 2012. Cutting a deal with the Taliban sends a signal that the US is not winning the war in Afghanistan. The staying power of the US in Afghanistan depends on how it understands the global nature of the Taliban threat. India, on the frontline of the global fight against terrorism, will definitely bear the brunt of this myopic US attempt at a political reconciliation with the Taliban, which is an integral part of the US-Afghan strategy. It would be prudent for the US to systematically include India in crafting this strategy. ‘The West would be better served if it takes India’s concerns into account’. However, if the US remains determined to bring a distinction between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ jihadi, it will neither reduce the threat of terrorism in the sub-continent, nor weaken the spirit of Taliban as a fighting force.

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