



CAPS commentaries provide well-timed and relevant study of current developments in Afghanistan and the broader region. Views of the author are his own and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of CAPS. These commentaries may be republished electronically or in print with due recognition to the author.

Strategic Overlapping in the Region about Afghanistan

Russia, China, Pakistan and Iran forming quadrilateral design to urge a new security perception in Afghanistan.

By Halimullah Kousary¹

February 19, 2017

¹ Halimullah Kousary serves as head of research with the Centre for Conflict and Peace

Ideological motivations against US-led western presence in Afghanistan may be considered a driving force behind the war. But it is also undeniable that divergent geostrategic interests at bilateral levels have been in play to help this force sustain the longest war in US history. Now indications are that situation is becoming more complex with other countries also turning assertive in the country. Russia, China and Pakistan tripartite meeting in Moscow on 27 December 2016 and the expanded round of it again on 15 February 2017 characterize this complexity and show strategic overlapping among these countries vis-à-vis Afghanistan.

Russia, China and Pakistan try to urge a new perception of the security situation in through this meeting. This perception paints ISIL as the real threat and the strategy espoused to fight it goes contrary to Kabul's reiterated argument that the solution to the ongoing war rests in reaching understanding among the regional states. Recently, there has been growing preferential treatment in the region in favor of non-state actors and prioritization of fight against one militant group (Islamic State, Khorasan Chapter, ISK) and staking national security interests on another (Taliban).

The shortsightedness of this move is that although Taliban might be able to confront ISK in the short term, in the long term it is important to see that foreign militants fighting in the Taliban ranks could remain either an impetus for Taliban themselves to support these groups at a juncture in future or an avenue of opportunity for ISK to potentially form nexus with them and focus on complementing goals. While ISIL has failed in its ambitious strategy to make breakthroughs in Afghanistan as in the Middle East, the group, however, has been able to split militant groups and shatter alliances between local and foreign terrorists – ability the outfit is still feared to benefit from and survive a foothold in Afghanistan in the future. Second, the conflict in Afghanistan is fluid to the extent that one group cannot remain centralized to the core including even Taliban. In November 2016, the Afghan government warned that at least 30 militant organizations are operating in the country and that foreigners constitute 25 % of these groups manpower. With such a foreign force, ability of Taliban to work up to the expectation of these countries remains questionable. One thing, however, is that the preferential treatment of the Taliban will give the group further leeway against the Afghan government.

Taliban will benefit from this scenario because Moscow and Beijing's calculation of the security situation in Afghanistan differs from that held by Washington and Kabul.

The two consider Taliban as the real threat and points to Pakistan as the key to dealing with group due to the safe havens in Pakistan that Taliban enjoys. Whereas, Moscow and Beijing are increasingly becoming concerned about threat from ISK and inclined towards Pakistan's paradigm using Taliban as strategic partner. In addition, Iran's security perception is influenced from the dynamics in the Middle East and the country also sees strategizing against ISK in nexus with Taliban in Afghanistan. These security perceptions on one hand lead to strategic overlapping among Russia, China, Iran and Pakistan but on the other hand put these countries at odd with Washington, Kabul and Delhi.

Such strategic overlapping places Kabul in catch-22 situation where US and India remain Afghanistan's only allies. US is main backer in terms of funding and troops numbers to the country and this does not allow it to be factored out of any roadmap carved out for the stability of Afghanistan. And India has been the largest aid-contributing partner. In such scenario, if the new administration in the US court some countries and go hard on others based on its threat matrix, countries in the region would also rev up efforts unilaterally or in tandem to defy. This raises the key question for Kabul, which is what measures it should undertake to fit into this new configuration.

There is already an understanding and contiguity in Kabul, Washington and Delhi that as long as Taliban enjoy external enablement, they will not feel the urge to reconcile thus calling for elimination of external sanctuary as the primary step towards success. Absent commitment from Pakistan based on this argument, Kabul sees enhanced relation with the US and India central to its sustainability. In the recent interactions with the Trump administration, President Ashraf Ghani has renewed commitment to Afghanistan-US Bilateral Strategic Agreement – a direction that Russia, China, Pakistan and Iran calculates as contrary to their geostrategic interests. The four countries fear that external powers might in due course use the continuing fluid situation in Afghanistan in pursuit of their larger objectives in the region and that the regional countries should work together to make such possibility irrelevant.

The Moscow meetings took place as there is growing stalemate on security dynamics and triggered justifiable concerns in Afghanistan. Kabul understands that it must employ a robust foreign policy in such a rapidly transforming situation and engage the regional stakeholders through being party to mechanism such as the Moscow meeting.

However, the prospects do not appear so hopeful as per how effective Kabul participation in such meetings will be in convincing these countries that the way forward is inter-state nexus to fight all hues of militants given that the four countries' priorities are assessed from a completely different security perception.

**Centre for Conflict and Peace Studies
Main Office
Shash Darak Road Phase # 09, House No 55 Kabul, Afghanistan**