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Afghanistan 2015: India should keep off the Strategic Muddle:

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Afghanistan in 2015 presents a complex strategic muddle for which India is neither politically, strategically, nor militarily equipped, to compete with the growing strategic convergence of Russia-China-Pakistan interests despite inherent self-contradictions among the three, and the unfolding Afghan-ISIS confrontation.

Admittedly, India has significant legitimate national security interests in the security and stability of Afghanistan, besides historical ties of shared strategic convergences on checkmating Pakistan's unceasing ambitions for political and military control of Afghanistan. In 2015, the Afghanistan picture for India stands drastically changed with the ascendancy into power in Kabul of President Ashraf Ghani.

Afghanistan's new President soon side-lined India in Afghanistan's security calculus in favour of Pakistan and China, his first ports of call on becoming President. His courtesy call on the Pakistan Army Chief during his Islamabad visit was unbecoming of the Head of State of Afghanistan. He followed this up with cancellation of arms sales contracts with India and sending Afghan military officers for training in Pakistan and further announcing coordination of Afghanistan's intelligence set-up with Pakistan Army's intelligence agency-the ISI.

Need more be said about which way the wind is flowing in Kabul as far as India is concerned? Was India prepared to meet this eventuality by its diplomatic establishment and its intelligence agencies? Or was India's Afghanistan policy been a casualty of the political power transition in New Delhi?

The stark reality is that in 2015 India was not prepared in terms of policy formulations and options on the impending strategic vacuum unfolding in Afghanistan with the winding down of the US military presence in Afghanistan of nearly fourteen years with doubtful gains and

an uncertain future.

India is not politically, strategically and militarily equipped to retrieve the unfolding situation in Afghanistan back into its favour. Simply put in 2015, Pakistan has outmanoeuvred India in Afghanistan by inducing China, and China in turn inducing Russia, to fill the strategic vacuum in Afghanistan with the United States not inclined to bear the Afghan cross any longer. In fact for some time there were voices within the American strategic community that China should be involved in Afghanistan's security to stabilise Afghanistan. It is not clear as to what leverages China has over Afghanistan to stabilise it other than the proxy use of the Pakistan Army. Or is it that we can expect direct Chinese Army involvement in Afghanistan?

Politically in 2015, India can hardly outbid the convergent strategic interests of the Russia-Pakistan-China Troika on Afghanistan for the time being, especially when US strategic permissiveness hovers in the background for the same. Why has the United States once again abandoned Afghanistan? Why did the United States leave Afghanistan to Russia and China to step in? Did the United States confer with India on its unfolding intentions on Afghanistan? Has the United States been a party to side-line India's legitimate strategic interests in Afghanistan?

The answers to these questions should prompt the Indian policy establishment to revise its policy stances on Russia, China and the United States. Pakistan the king-pin of Afghanistan's strategic muddle needs a separate policy treatment. India's policies in the Indian Subcontinent should focus on side-lining of Pakistan in regional politics.

Strategically, other than drawing-in Iran for concerted policy initiatives on Afghanistan because of shared strategic interests on keeping Pakistan, out of Afghanistan, India has no other strategic option. India lost the Iran-leverage by voting against Iran at the UN on the nuclear issue under US pressure by the previous Congress Government. Further with Iran's close ties to Russia and China, it is unlikely to go against the new Russia-China interest in Afghanistan for geopolitical compulsions.

In the absence of geographic contiguity with Afghanistan and India not having developed sizeable military intervention capabilities in the region, India is not militarily equipped to intervene in Afghanistan. This may have been possible as a serious and viable option if India-Iran Strategic Partnership forged in the last decade was not allowed to wither by the previous government.

There is yet another new and disturbing dimension being added to the Afghanistan muddle and that is the building violent rivalry between the Pakistan-sponsored Afghan Taliban and the growing encroachment of the Middle East terrorist grouping of the ISIS. The ISIS is emerging as a potent force in Afghanistan's playground of Islamic Jihadi forces and outfits in Afghanistan's domestic domain. So much so that the Afghan Taliban was forced to declare that the ISIS should not intervene in Afghan affairs and let the Afghan Taliban spearhead the Islamist struggle in Afghanistan.

It will be an interesting scenario if the ISIS were able to eclipse the Afghan Taliban in the Afghan domestic power play of Islamist outfits. Let us not forget that in the Middle East it is reported that the ISIS draws support from Saudi Arabia and Turkey. As far as the Afghan Taliban is concerned it is Pakistan's protégé and prior to 2001, only China and the UAE maintained official contacts with the Afghan Taliban. Presently too China can be said to be the Afghan Taliban's patron and facilitating their talks with other Afghan groups.

It needs to be noted that neither Russia nor China have any significant stakes in Afghanistan's long term stability; their investments in Afghanistan would be limited to keeping away the spill-over of Islamists Jihadis into proximity of Russian peripheries and in case of China into Xinjiang where China is facing a virtual Islamic Jihad. With such limited aims one should not expect Russia or even China to emerge as long-terms determinants of Afghanistan's future.

Therefore in 2015 Afghanistan presents a dismal strategic muddle which defies any prospects of security and stability emerging despite the Russia-China-Pakistan Troika attempting to fill-in the strategic vacuum.

Afghanistan stands famously termed as the 'Graveyard of Imperial Pretensions'. Russia has earlier met this fate and the United States recently. Let now China meet the same fate. Why should India bother? Future events may themselves fashion themselves out in a manner that the United States persuades India, without the Pakistan-Russia-China baggage, to join in a joint effort to facilitate emergence of a secure and stable Afghanistan. In the following interregnum India must make serious assessment of its Afghanistan policy options and putting into place the wherewithal to implement those options.

India must also seriously ponder that in any future policy options on Afghanistan, there is not much scope of 'Soft Power' diplomacy. What will be required is to add the vitamin-supplement of "Hard Power" too to add muscle to Indian Afghan policies.

Concluding, the nett assessment is that India should keep out of Afghanistan's strategic muddle and let Russia once again and China more specifically in 2015 muddy its hands and reputation in untangling the Afghanistan muddle. Nor should India join any regional initiatives on Afghanistan sponsored by Russia and China, so that they could add more respectability by involving India.

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