

Latest Afghan initiative looks unrealistic

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Theatre of war Not all the actors contribute to the denouement

The Quadrilateral Contact Group will not succeed unless it sheds blinkers regarding Taliban and Pakistan's intentions

The Quadrilateral Contact Group involving Afghanistan, Pakistan, the US and China met during the second week of October 2017 in Muscat. Since its inception in January 2016, it had five meetings that year, ending in May 2016 with the killing of Taliban leader Mullah Mansour in a drone attack in Balochistan. Mansour carrying a Pakistani passport raised many questions concerning US-Pakistan and Pakistan-Taliban relations, ultimately leading to the demise of the QCG in 2017.

However, with the QCG meeting in Muscat this month, it appears its second season has begun. There seem to be five myths associated with the QCG, leading to the belief that it could succeed. Will it be able to achieve a breakthrough? Will it bring the Taliban to the peace table? And why is Pakistan keen on the QCG?

Pakistan and the Taliban

Myth 1: The search for good Taliban and the belief that the Taliban will come to the peace table

The QCG will not succeed unless the Taliban comes to the negotiating table. And the Taliban will not. It is a simple equation which the US does not seem to understand. This failure to understand stems from a belief that there is a "good Taliban" and it is only a matter of time before the Taliban gets divided and a section joins the mainstream.

Since 2001, the search for the good Taliban has been futile. The latest twin attacks in Gardez (Paktia province) and Andar (Ghazni province) in Afghanistan a day after the QCG meeting in Muscat would reveal where the Taliban stands on the peace process. More than 45 police officers and 20 civilians were killed in these two attacks.

There is no good Taliban. And they will not come to a negotiating table. They would rather wait it out and tire the American forces hoping to take over. Reports of a Taliban resurgence, even those prepared in the US, and the testimonies given to the Congress would underline the ground situation. Will the Taliban want a political deal if they believe they are winning the war on the ground? Even if they do, what can the QCG offer in return?

Myth 2: Pakistan will succeed in bringing the Taliban to the table

The second myth that Pakistan has been perpetuating is its ability to bring the Taliban to the negotiating table. Give us some more time, we will get this done, seems to be the Pakistani mantra at the QCG.

Pakistan may have provided sanctuary to the Taliban. And political support since inception. But the latter is not the former's puppet. Perhaps Pakistan has greater influence on the Haqqani Network, but not the Afghan Taliban. There were serious redlines for both.

When Pakistan wanted the Afghan Taliban to give up Osama bin Laden due to American pressure, the Taliban refused. When the Taliban wanted to have an independent channel of dialogue a few years ago, Pakistan scuttled the move. The collapse of the Doha process with the Taliban was primarily because of Pakistan's reluctance.

There are reports suggesting that the Afghan Taliban is unhappy with Pakistan for colluding with the Americans, leading to the killing of Mansour. The Taliban does not trust Pakistan completely.

Myth 3: The QCG will succeed with China inside, Russia outside

Russia's new position, if it is to be true, will complicate the balance in Afghanistan and the QCG. Reports from Pakistan suggest that Russia is supporting the Afghan Taliban. The presumed rationale, according to a news report from Pakistan, is that a strong Taliban would negate the space for the ISIS in Afghanistan, as the latter is a bigger threat to Russia.

This cannot be a reason for Russian support at this juncture. Perhaps the larger question of US-Russia relations and the American position in Syria and Iraq is forcing Russia to react in Afghanistan.

If the Pakistani stories suggesting a "Moscow Shura" is true, what can the QCG accomplish? Shouldn't Russia be in, instead of China, for the former knows more about Afghanistan, its politics and actors? Even Afghanistan would be willing to get Russia in. Are the US and Pakistan willing to provide a role to Russia within the QCG?

The Kabul connection *Myth 4: Pakistan and Afghanistan are ready for peace*

Certainly not. Both Kabul and Islamabad have their own road maps, contradicting each other. It is Af vs Pak, rather than Af-Pak. There is no indication that there has been a paradigm shift within Pakistan suggesting a different approach to Afghanistan. If the former wants latter to be its satellite, and believes in using its 'veritable' arm to control Kabul, there will never be bilateral peace.

Afghanistan has been constantly exploring alternatives to reduce its dependence on Pakistan. The present political leadership in Kabul is certainly not looking to Islamabad.

Myth 5: Afghanistan wants the QCG

Is the government in Kabul keen on the QCG? If not, why would it take part in the QCG?

There is American pressure on Kabul to talk to Islamabad and the Afghan Taliban. Else, the Afghans would certainly want the Americans and Pakistanis to remain outside any internal peace initiatives. The QCG is also a contradiction and makes an "Afghan led, Afghan owned" peace process a rhetorical and laughable. Aren't the Afghans already privately laughing over American naivety on the QCG?

The US may consider the QCG as a facilitator but the Afghans do not see it that way. They see Pakistan as a part of the problem and not a solution. Nor does it see any value in bringing in China.

The Afghans would prefer Russia and the US in a trilateral relationship to facilitate a process with the Taliban, rather than the present QCG.

So, why?

Why then is Pakistan pushing the QCG?

Simple. To make itself relevant. Especially since President Donald Trump made that harsh statement in his Afghan surge speech on Pakistan's role in the Af-Pak, and invited India, Islamabad has gone into panic mode.

The QCG, Pakistan believes, would make it an important pillar for the US in Afghanistan. It provides Islamabad leverage vis-à-vis the US and Afghanistan. The QCG provides an opportunity for Pakistan to control and, if needed, even sabotage the Afghan peace process.

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