



CISS Analysis

Bilateral Security Agreement (BSA): Regional Context and Implications

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Overview

The proposed Bilateral Security Agreement (BSA) would be an accord between Afghanistan and US to legalize the stationing and operations of United States forces for post 2014 environment in Afghanistan. Text of the agreement stipulates that it is aimed at, *'advancing peace, security, and stability; strengthening state institutions; supporting Afghanistan's long-term economic and social development; and encouraging regional cooperation.'*¹ Draft of BSA was negotiated and finalized in November 2013, but President Hamid Karzai has refused to sign it despite insistence by US and its approval by Mili Shura (Afghan Parliament) on November 27, 2013 and of Loya-Jirga (gathering of tribal elders) on November 24, 2013. Political commentators are of the view that Mr. Karzai wants to raise his political stature by not signing the Agreement, and Afghanistan's new president after April, 2014 elections will most likely sign it. When signed, BSA will give wide-ranging authority to US to move men and military equipment to and from Afghanistan, and Afghanistan's laws will not apply on them. The proposed BSA draft provides the necessary legal and political cover to the United States for its military presence in the face of the emerging political, strategic and economic realities of Afghanistan, and the region at large.

BSA would be an arrangement that will strengthen US position and provide it a launching pad for power projection in the region. The exact number of US troops planned to be stationed in Afghanistan, after 2014 has not yet been announced by the White House. BSA document is also silent on this account. The number could therefore be increased or decreased according to the emerging situation. Media reports suggest that President Obama is seeking to leave a few thousand Special Forces troops, military trainers, CIA personnel, "contractors" and surveillance units for 10 more years in Afghanistan until the end of 2024.

Afghanistan is an important country for the US, principally because it is the US' only military base in the region, touching various resource-rich former Soviet republics to the northwest, located on the periphery of Russia, while China is situated in the northeast, Iran to the west, and Pakistan to the east. It is vital for US to have Special Forces and monitoring capabilities in Afghanistan to project and protect its interests on the periphery of Afghanistan.

Commentary on BSA articles

The draft document was finalized by US and Afghan governments in November, 2013 and consists of twenty six articles which cover all the areas regarding the US forces placed on Afghan territory for a period of ten years. These include Definitions, purpose and scope, Developing and Sustaining Afghanistan's Defense and Security Capabilities, Defense and Security Cooperation Mechanisms, External Aggression, Use of Agreed Facilities and Areas Movement of Vehicles, Vessels, and Aircraft, Status of Personnel, Entry into Force, Amendment, and Termination. Few articles of BSA however, carry serious implications for all the neighboring states of Afghanistan. These articles have been discussed in some detail here.

Article IV of proposed BSA places total responsibility for seeking funds for Afghanistan on US. This will have two implications for long term internal stability of Afghanistan. Firstly Afghanistan will remain dependent on US and other external sources for its security as well as economic development. Future of Afghanistan will, therefore, also be hostage to the internal political dynamics of states providing monetary assistance. Secondly, Afghanistan will be less focused on indigenous resource mobilization and revenue generation.

There is no guarantee that the US Congress will approve funds for Afghanistan in the coming years owing to US' own economic difficulties as well as its changing strategic objectives in Central Asia and Asia-Pacific regions. Congress has already downscaled military and development aid for Afghanistan. The appropriated US aid for FY2014 is expected to be approximately \$6.1 billion, including \$4.7 billion to train and equip ANSF.² Afghanistan's budget for 2014 is 428 billion in local currency (\$7.3 billion). Donors grant cover 66% (\$4.81 billion) and domestic resources finance 34% (\$2.48 billion) of the total national budget. However, 46%

(\$3.35 billion) of the total budget is allocated for security sector which is much more than what Afghanistan can finance from its indigenous sources. This situation is untenable in future. Maulvi Shahabuddin Dilawar, Chief Taliban negotiator while addressing The Foundation for Strategic Research, Paris, in 2012 had pointed out “It (Afghanistan) cannot maintain a highly paid army in the long term due to its expenses being several times higher than the country’s GDP”.³ He had further said that dependence on other states will make Afghanistan accept even unreasonable demands of the donor countries.

Article VI of the BSA, condemns all past foreign support to the belligerent groups in Afghanistan in last few decade. Unwittingly, this is also criticism of 1980s American policy, which was focused at arming, training and financing Mujahedeen fighting against invading Soviet forces in Afghanistan.

Secondly, Article VI, by calling for strengthening US-Afghan cooperation against attempts by regional states to advance their security interests, also sets parameters of a broader future political settlement that would end the internal conflict in Afghanistan. But such a political dialogue has to be open and US has to show flexibility on the future political architecture in Afghanistan, for negotiations to be result oriented. US’ insistence on elections and conduct of government under the existing constitution may be problematic as Taliban have questioned legitimacy of the present Afghan constitution, which they claim was made under tutelage of occupying powers.

Alarms bells for regional states have also been raised in the said article. US has indirectly communicated a threat of retaliatory measures by announcing multi-faceted cooperation with Afghanistan in the event of security dispute between Afghanistan and its neighbors. US has taken a position without considering merits of any dispute that may arise in future. This is operationalization of US intent of being the only guarantor of security and stability in the Central and South Asia. Neighbors of Afghan countries deem continued US presence in the region inherently destabilizing and inimical to their interests. Regional states are also against projection of US power and stabilization of its role in the region, which BSA seeks to advance and ensure on near permanent basis.

An earlier draft of article IX of BSA document (November, 2013) talks about “Positioning and Storage of Equipment and Materiel” used by the United States

forces in Afghanistan. It authorizes US to position and exert its full control over equipment and material within the agreed and future facilities in Afghanistan. United States as a party to this agreement makes two additional but very important pledges:

- Not to store chemical and biological weapons in the territory of Afghanistan.
- Not to store or position nuclear weapons in the territory of Afghanistan.

It is interesting to note that the earlier draft of the BSA does not mention pledges, of storing and positioning chemical, biological, and nuclear weapons in Afghanistan. There can be two explanations for the change in this position. First, Afghanistan's neighbors and major powers such as China and Russia may have demanded guarantees from the United States that these, non-positioning and non-storing provisions related to WMD, must be stated explicitly in return for supporting US presence in post-2014 Afghanistan. Or secondly, that United States itself wanted to send reassuring signals to regional countries, particularly two heavy weights, China and Russia, in order to soften their possible opposition to long term US military presence in Afghanistan. Moreover, it can also be argued that since both the United States and Afghanistan are a state party to the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), as well as Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC), and Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BTWC) they have added these guarantees to fulfill treaty obligations.

But is it reassuring?

There are reasons to be skeptical. First, US still stores and deploys approximately 480 nuclear weapons at eight bases in six NPT member states of Europe despite treaty commitments. Second, and more importantly, implications for regional nuclear deterrence specifically with regards to Pakistan, Iran and China stem more from the deployment of Ballistic Missile Defense systems (BMD). There is no pledge by the United States regarding the non-deployment of regional BM defenses in Afghanistan. US' intentions, strategic calculations, and its bilateral relations, being fluid and not static, one cannot exclude the possibility of deployment of such defenses in future.

Third reason for being skeptical of US assurances regarding WMD in Afghanistan come from the draft BSA itself. There is no oversight or verification mechanism that can keep a check on US commitment. Consider for example articles VI and X.

Article VI containing the “External Aggression” clause will practically be dependent upon US perceptions of threat assessment regarding Afghanistan’s ‘sovereignty’, and that might well change US pledge towards non-deployment of WMD in Afghanistan in order to deter perceived aggression. Then article X titled **Movement of Vehicles, Vessels, and Aircraft** section 4 explicitly rules out any verification of materials being transported in US government aircraft and vehicles.

Any level of US military presence in Afghanistan will carry strategic implications for regional countries as described in the analysis section below. Presence of WMD on Afghan soil will certainly raise the anxieties to the next level and the language of the BSA draft in this regards is not reassuring as it lacks verification mechanisms coupled with its changing relations with regional countries, two of which are nuclear weapons state, and third i.e. Iran, possesses operational ballistic missiles capability.

Analysis: Perspectives and Implications

Continued presence of US forces beyond 2014 has strategic implications for regional security and stability. US seeks to use Afghanistan for pursuing a ‘New Great Game’ in Central Asia and broader South Asia against China and Russia, its strategic competitors. US bases in Afghanistan post-2014 would allow US to monitor developments in Russia and China, thus, hindering their ability to maneuver independently. Along with Asia-Pacific region, Central Asia is America’s priority area of strategic focus. Washington views its presence in Afghanistan necessary to contain Chinese inroads into the region.

China is seeking strategic and economic cooperation with Central Asian states to meet its energy demands and counter threats arising from militancy in its Xinjiang province. But US presence in Afghanistan can create obstructions in energy cooperation between China and Central Asian States, and at the same time US would maintain a capability to stoke the fire of militancy in restive northwestern China. In recent years China has pushed regional and Afghanistan’s security on the top of Shanghai Cooperation Organization’s (SCO) agenda. This indicates reservations in Beijing over the BSA and the continued US presence in the region. China has expressed its desire to work with regional countries to

support a constructive reconciliation process to maintain peace and stability in Afghanistan, and beyond in the Central Asian region.

Similarly, BSA and presence of US forces beyond 2014, is against Russian strategic interests. Russia has always considered Central Asia as its 'zone of influence' and historically Central Asian States have been close to Kremlin as Moscow exercises deep political influence across the region. But in recent years, Washington has made inroads in Central Asian States at the expense of Moscow. Thus presence of US troops in Afghanistan beyond 2014 would mean that US will continue to restrict Russian influence in the region, which would lead to competition between Moscow and Washington over securing their respective interests. If recent events in Ukraine, aggravate further, to the extent that they threaten Russia's major interests, there can be a possibility of Russia severing its cooperation with United States on Afghanistan, withdraw its support to the Bilateral Security Agreement (BSA) and influence the northern distribution network to the detriment of NATO forces in Afghanistan.

Iran and India are two other regional states which have interests in regard to US presence in the region. India has called upon Afghanistan to conclude BSA with US, because it seeks US support to off-set Pakistani influence in Kabul. India has heavily invested in the reconstruction and development projects in Afghanistan. To secure its investments and enhance its security footprint, New Delhi has also expanded its strategic ties with Kabul. Moreover, New Delhi and Washington have been consulting each other on the regional developments in recent months. A senior (unnamed) Indian official commenting on BSA said:

India has always welcomed a BSA between the United States and Afghanistan, without getting into the details as to what it is in its present form. That is something that is for Afghanistan to decide and for it to come to an understanding with the United States...In our interactions with our foreign partners ... we say it would be a good idea. We say, 'Yes, we think it would be good for Afghanistan to sign this agreement'.⁴

Iran, on the contrary, has voiced its concerns against continued presence of US forces in Afghanistan, because it perceives US presence as an attempt to encircle it. At the same time friendly Iranian ties with Karzai regime and improving relations with US signal a tacit Iranian support for BSA agreement even if it is not

prepared yet to openly say so. Iranian Ambassador to Afghanistan Mohammad Reza Bahrami hinted at this dual track approach in an interview in November 2013 where he said:

In terms of the law, it's the genuine right of Afghanistan to preserve its national interests and sign an agreement with another country, and we won't interfere with it, because it's the internal affairs of Afghanistan,...we are concerned about the presence of U.S. forces in Afghanistan, because we believe that the presence of U.S. troops would create some problems and we have shared our perspectives with the Afghan government in this respect⁵

Growing rapprochement between Tehran and Washington will enhance US position in Afghanistan.

Pakistan as a neighbor of Afghanistan has natural stakes in any geo-political development in the region. The situation is fraught with uncertainty for Pakistan when US led international forces complete the drawdown process this year. The question, how the long term presence of "residual" United States forces will shape Afghanistan's regional behavior is linked to the signing of BSA. Presence of a super power on its borders complicates Pakistan's management of its threat perception and curtails its ability to project power in the region. Moreover, Pakistan and United States have divergent strategic views about the region and the classic security dilemma will continue to shape US – Pakistan relations.

Conclusion

The final version of the proposed Bilateral Security Agreement between Afghanistan and United States, and US's force posture post-2014 is yet to emerge. Moreover, an important strategic event, of national elections in Afghanistan, is to take place in April of this year. The post election setup will determine the future political dispensation in Kabul and that will in turn 'decide' about BSA. The reconciliation process, between the Taliban and political elites who ruled Afghanistan for over eight years with international backing seems to be very slow and its outcome is unpredictable. It may remain short of any tangible results at worst. Given these unknowns, however, it is clear that United States engagement in the region will not wither away at least for the next one decade. Presence of US

economic, military and political foot print in Afghanistan will greatly influence the strategic landscape of the region.

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Endnotes

¹ "Security and Defense Cooperation Agreement between the United States of America and the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. Ministry of Foreign Affairs Afghanistan,"

<http://mfa.gov.af/Content/files/2013-11-18%20BSA%20TEXT.pdf>

² Kenneth Katzman, "Afghanistan: Post-Taliban Governance, Security, and U.S. Policy," CRS March 4, 2014, accessed on March 13 2014, <https://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/row/RL30588.pdf>

³ Quoted in Khalid Iqbal, "End of Afghanistan Game & options for Pakistan," *Criterion Quarterly* 8, no. 2 (April/June 2013): p. 67.

⁴ Ashish Kumar, "Urge Karzai to ink Security Pact, US Tells India," *The Tribune Online Edition*, December 12, 2013, <http://www.tribuneindia.com/2013/20131213/world.htm#1>

⁵ Karim Amini, "Iranian Envoy Supports Afghan Rights to BSA, With Reservations," *Tolo News*, November 20, 2013, <http://www.tolonews.com/en/afghanistan/12802-iranian-envoy-supports-afghan-right-to-bsa-with-reservations>