Afghanistan Faces a New Future With Some Positive Signs

The news from Afghanistan is not good for the Americans. The troops abandoned the Bagram military base in the dead of night without bothering to advise their Afghanistan “allies”. Looters moved in before being replaced by the Taliban forces (banned in Russia) who naturally rejoiced at the treasure trove of weapons and other equipment that the Americans had abandoned.

Throughout the rest of the country the Taliban are making record advances and it is now likely only a matter of weeks before they control the whole of the country. The rapid defeat of the regular government troops has raised some alarm in countries on Afghanistan’s borders. In particular the rapidly changing situation in Afghanistan has raised concerns among member states of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) several of whom share borders with Afghanistan.

The rapidly changing situation has led to China’s foreign minister Wang Yi to make urgent visits to 3 countries that share a border with Afghanistan. The visits come at the invitation of the governments of Turkmenistan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan and will take place between July 12th and 16th.

These meetings will precede a meeting of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation-Afghanistan contact group. The object of the meeting is for the parties to exchange views on promoting peace in the region, including, importantly,
increasing the level of cooperation between the SCO and Afghanistan.

The rapid United States withdrawal from Afghanistan has given rise to a level of instability in Afghanistan that China, among other neighbouring countries, fears create instability within their own territories.

The SCO has a potentially important role to play in promoting stability in Afghanistan which is one of four observer states of the SCO. Six of Afghanistan’s neighbours are members of the SCO. As such the SCO is uniquely placed to promote a range of development assistance to Afghanistan, including the promotion of projects to develop Afghanistan rich resources. The latter have largely been neglected through the 20 years of American occupation and that of its allies.

A Taliban spokesman Suhail Shaheen gave an interview to This Week in Asia last Wednesday. Mr Shaheen said that the Taliban sees China as a friend and once they hold power they will engage in talks with China about beginning the process of reconstruction of the countries assets, neglected during the years of occupation.

And important announcement made by the Chinese government through its foreign minister Wang Yi was for an expansion of the huge Pakistan – China economic development corridor to include Afghanistan. If this succeeds it will play an important role in securing Afghanistan’s economic recovery, which has essentially been handicapped for the past 20 years by continuous warfare.

It is clear that Russia will be an important part of Afghanistan’s redevelopment. Although the Russian government does not officially recognise the Taliban group it has nonetheless played host to several important meetings in Moscow involving representatives of the Taliban regime. When asked about a possible Russian return to Afghanistan the foreign minister Sergei Lavrov was dismissive. It is clear that any future Russian involvement in the country will be in the context of the SCO.

At the request of the Tajikistan government Russia has sent a contingent of troops to that country to assist with border protection. The Tajikistan government became alarmed at the influx of Afghan refugees across its borders which threatened the countries capacity to cope with a sudden and large influx of refugees.

The numbers however, remain relatively small. They do not begin to compare with the estimated 1.5 million Afghans who have sought refuge in Pakistan over the years. The Pakistan government is sympathetic to the Taliban, which is one reason why it refused an American request for the use of its military facilities following the United States withdrawal from Afghanistan, now scheduled for August.

The Americans have announced that they reserve the right to mount air attacks in Afghanistan, presumably flying from one of their Middle East bases. It is difficult to see the rationale behind this announcement. The United States has no sustainable interest in Afghanistan. The flights will presumably be in support of Afghan government troops, but it is difficult seeing the latter having any substantial role following the inevitable Taliban takeover of the country which must now be only a matter of time.

The position of other foreign troops must also be open to question. The Australian government for example, has been conspicuously quiet on the fate of its military contingent in Afghanistan which began 20 years ago. They were first committed to Afghanistan following 11 September 2001 attacks on the World Trade Centre and have been there ever since. The then Australian Prime Minister John Howard cited the ANZUS treaty as the rationale for the involvement, the only time the treaty has ever been invoked.

A number of Australian troops are now under investigation for allegedly murdering Afghanistan prisoners. Whether that matter now proceeds in the light of Australia’s withdrawal of his troops from Afghanistan is an open question. Post withdrawal support for the Afghan government is now conspicuously absent. The response to a Taliban takeover is unknown, but it is unlikely to be favourable.

Afghanistan’s best hope for the future lies in its association with the SCO. The early signs are encouraging with a positive response being shown both by the Taliban leadership and also the major countries involved in the SCO, especially China and Russia. For the first time in several decades, Afghanistan future at last looks positive.

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