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The Afghan chessboard

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Despite Pakistan being cock-a-hoop about the prospect of western withdrawal from Afghanistan, there is no reason why India can't ace the Afghan game

It is 2014 in Kabul. The last vestiges of the US presence are being extinguished fast. The British and the ragtag European contingents quit ages ago. The Taliban rules southern and eastern Afghanistan with an iron hand, guided mostly by Pakistan. There is strong resistance to the Taliban in the west and the north. The country increasingly looks fractured. Hamid Karzai is a figure of the past.

This scenario may sound overtly pessimistic in light of President Karzai's assertion that Afghans will be able to manage their security by 2014. But it can hardly be ruled out. A similar hope was voiced when the Red Army marched back home in 1989 and Najibullah, a forgotten figure today, was firmly in the saddle. Soon after the Soviets left, his army and police simply melted away.

A similar script is unfolding again. On 29 June, the US special inspector general for Afghanistan reconstruction released a report on the state of preparedness of Afghan national security forces (ANSF). Contrary to Karzai's hope, the report tells a dismal story. Let alone the hard task of battling the Taliban, ANSF is hardly prepared to carry out basic policing duties even in relatively safe environments.

So it is hardly surprising that Pakistan is cock-a-hoop about the prospect of western withdrawal from Afghanistan. It can smell "strategic depth" in Afghanistan, a dream that

has eluded it since 1947. One can also be sure that mistakes made earlier, such as attacking the US, will not be repeated. This has made the punditry in Delhi forlorn. There is no reason to be despondent.

For the fact is if Islamabad won't let the Taliban repeat old mistakes, it is already paving the ground for new ones. Its excessive reliance on Pashtuns, and that too of one variety, will ensure the alienation of other Afghan communities. It is cementing a template of past Afghan ethnic wars in a Faustian bid to further its aims. That is bound to backfire. This is one mistake that Pakistan can't avoid making.

India should not compete with Pakistan for Pashtun influence. To be sure, we should have good ties with various Pashtun factions, but this should not be at the cost of our long-time friends, notably those of the former Northern Alliance. In addition, in cooperation with Iran, India ought to focus on building ties with regional players in western Afghanistan. It may be a rough ride for some years, but there is no reason why we can't ace the Afghan game.