

Stability in Afghanistan and Implications for India

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USSR's intervention in Afghanistan and its consequential failure (some refer to it as USSR's Vietnam) of its policy is said to have contributed in not an insignificant manner to the demise of the Soviet Union. By the time Soviet Union withdrew in early 1989, about 14,500 Soviet and an estimated one million Afghan lives had been lost since the USSR incursion in 1979. The US's and Pakistan's policies in Afghanistan gave rise to the emergence of the *Taliban* and other factions of *Mujahideen*, who still remain active in Afghanistan. While these policies served the short term interests of both the US and Pakistan, yet as the events have proved, supporting *Taliban* did not turn out to be beneficial in a number of ways both for the US and Pakistan. Afghanistan during heydays of *Taliban* regime (1996-2001) had become epicentre of terrorism with sanctuaries and training facilities being provided to likes of *Al Qaeda*, Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) and holy warriors from Chechnya and CAR countries besides providing training to other assorted terrorist groups. Even China felt threatened from fundamentalist and extremist Muslim elements of Afghanistan because of its vulnerabilities in Xinjiang and its problems with Muslim Uighurs.

Therefore, when American forces launched *Operation Enduring Freedom* (OEF) against the *Taliban* regime in October 2001 consequent to 11 September 2001 terrorist attack, this step was largely welcomed by Russia, China, CAR, India and others. Russia and China raised no objections to the US being granted air bases and logistics facilities in CAR nations since it suited their short term strategic interests. Pakistan was forced to do a U-turn in its policies, however, till now it remains a reluctant partner in the US and western nations' global war against terrorism and its attitude to terrorism continues to be ambiguous.

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Journal of the United Service Institution of India, Vol. CXXXVII, No. 567, January-March 2007.

Stability in Afghanistan

Taliban with the help of its sponsors Pakistan, is on the comeback path in southern and eastern Afghanistan which threatens to undermine the international efforts of achieving peace, security and stability in Afghanistan. Thus, even after five years of demise of *Taliban* regime the situation in Afghanistan, at present, looks somewhat similar to what it was before, except that *Taliban* is not in power. Neither the US forces nor International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) manned by the NATO countries or for that matter President Karzai's democratically elected government have been able to exert control over outlying areas especially the southern and eastern provinces of Afghanistan. Several factors are responsible for this continuing state of instability and insecurity which would have cascading effects on regional and international security.

There appears to be weakening of commitment on part of the US which has handed over the most important mission of combating the insurgency in the South and East to NATO which was more comfortable with its mission of providing Provincial Reconstruction Teams in northern and western Afghanistan. The US also diverted its attention, resources and efforts from building Afghanistan and concentrated more on Iraq which created conditions for present situation in Afghanistan. Peace dividend gained after removal of *Taliban* regime consequent to the success of *Operation Enduring Freedom* was not consolidated and exploited. Half a decade of intervening period has become a tale of missed opportunities.

The problems of governance, security, unemployment, opium cultivation and drug trafficking, lack of law and order and reconstruction remain even after five years of commencement of Bonn process started in October 2001. An elected parliament (after September 2005 parliamentary elections and October 2004 Presidential elections) was expected to provide legitimacy and strength to the government to address these issues in a substantive way. But the Afghan government has not been able to address the domestic issues in a meaningful and substantive manner. Neither the international aid which was to be provided to Afghanistan by the participants of Bonn process has contributed to improve the lot of the common people.

Current Situation in Afghanistan

The year 2006 has already achieved the dubious distinction of being one of the goriest year of last 23 years of turmoil in a turbulent nation which has not seen peace since April 1978 when communist regime took over. Since beginning of 2006, over 4000 people mostly *Taliban* have been killed in violence related incidents in Afghanistan. NATO forces claim to have killed 180 *Taliban* insurgents in first week of November alone. *Taliban* leader Mullah Mohammad Omar warned in October 2006 on the occasion of holy month of Ramadan that his men will intensify their fighting to 'surprising levels' to drive out foreign infidels. *Taliban* leaders are preparing for a massive spring offensive in early 2007. The fatal casualties of the US forces and NATO so far (12 March 2007), from 2001 onwards, have been 540 with the year 2006 contributing 191, the largest so far in a single year. Many innocent civilians have been killed in *Taliban* related violence because of indiscriminate response of the security forces especially due to heightened intensity of air attacks against *Taliban* insurgents. This has further alienated the local populace. Charles De Gaulle, a former President of France observed, "You may be sure that the Americans will commit all the stupidities they can think of, plus some that are beyond imagination" – in the same vein the US and NATO forces have adopted sledgehammer tactics which have been instrumental in creating more local support for *Taliban* rather than causing any substantial harm to them.

Strategic Underpinnings or the Conflict

The strategic interests of many regional and extra regional players have a great bearing on the emerging security situation in Afghanistan. The presence of the US and NATO forces prevents *Taliban* and Pakistan from installing a regime of their liking. Instability in Afghanistan not only justifies the US military presence in Afghanistan but it also enables the US to maintain its military and logistic bases in Pakistan and Central Asia which help it to address its other global security concerns (although such presence may not be liked by many regional players). Logistic facilities and bases provided by Pakistan help the US and NATO forces not only in their war against terrorism but also enable the US to keep a wary eye on a nuclear and unstable Pakistan, where internal dynamics and external policies are moving it towards a precipice. (For

instance, in the Failed State Index, Pakistan stands at ninth place for states most likely to fail, ahead of Afghanistan which is at tenth place). The US military presence in Afghanistan, Pakistan and other areas puts a serious strategic pressure on Iran to accommodate the US interests and offers increased options to the US in its dealings with Iran. The US air base in Kyrgyzstan, logistics support from Tajikistan for OEF and transit rights in Kazakhstan keep the US flag flying in Central Asia where Russia and China are working to expand their strategic influence.

For NATO, Afghan mission has become a test case for its credibility and relevance. After demise of the Soviet Union it had been looking for expansion and was involved in missions in its geographical periphery. Though initially a peace enforcement mission under Chapter VII of the UN Charter, the Afghan mission is becoming more of a mission to combat a full blown insurgency. There is also lack of mission clarity in their role and different NATO partners have their own rules of engagement thus complicating the coordination of a disparate force in synergizing their fight against *Taliban*. Years of neglect of military budgets by NATO nations reflect on their inadequate performance on the field. NATO troops lack the wherewithal to fight insurgency in difficult Afghan terrain and look over their shoulders for helicopters, air support and logistics support from the US. While the US is in the process of reducing the strength of its troops by 20 per cent in Afghanistan, NATO is unable to muster additional troops required (2500 additional soldiers needed according to one estimate) from its member countries. Poland, a new convert to NATO is expected to provide 1,000 troops for Afghanistan but it would hardly solve NATO's problem. Increasing tally of fatal casualties of NATO partners and public opinion in their respective countries is also exerting a negative impact on NATO's efforts.

Meanwhile, Pakistan, a fragile state in itself is thriving on instability and insecurity in Afghanistan. Even though Pakistan's President, Prime Minister and its military establishment has stated many times that they support a peaceful, prosperous, stable and strong Afghanistan, the evidence on the ground points to the contrary. In fact, a strong and stable Afghanistan has always been a rival of Pakistan and except for *Taliban* government no other dispensation in Afghanistan has either been under Pakistan's

tutelage or favourably disposed to it. A strong government in Kabul has always been a motivator for Pashtoon and Balochi nationalism in Pakistan and has raised questions on controversial Durand line, the border between Afghanistan and Pakistan. *Taliban* thus becomes an instrument in hands of Pakistan to suppress nationalistic tendencies and supplant it with religious fervour that lays emphasis on Muslim *Ummah* and helps Pakistan in achieving its long term political and strategic objectives in Afghanistan.

During the *Taliban* years, Pakistan had achieved its ambition of obtaining 'strategic depth' in Afghanistan and had also entertained visions of extending strategic depth to include Islamic nations of Central Asia through *Taliban*. In the bargain it ended up by exporting fundamentalism, terrorism and instability to Central Asian countries. Pakistan and *Taliban* trained and funded terrorists had reached as far afield as Chechnya.

Pakistan has become a key player in Afghanistan and is in a happy position to harass the US, NATO and Afghan government through its support to *Taliban* on the one hand and also remain an indispensable, major non-NATO ally by providing logistics and other support to the US and NATO on the other hand. Whether the US and NATO forces stay or leave, it benefits Pakistan either way. Presence of the US continues to make Pakistan strategically relevant to the US and it benefits both militarily and economically. Because of its support to the US, it receives military aid which meets one third to one fourth of its military expenditure and it enables Pakistan to obtain latest military hardware which need not necessarily be for fighting counter terrorism missions. It has also received economic aid of over \$ 1.6 billion and the US nod to World Bank and IMF to extend credit facilities which have improved Pakistan's macro-economic growth. And if and when the extra-regional forces leave Afghanistan, Pakistan would be waiting to claim its strategic space in Afghanistan through its *Taliban* proxies who have become better placed with their recent resurgence with the help of Pakistan.

NATO Delicately Poised

Situation for the NATO forces has been worsening since Pakistan signed a truce with *Taliban* in Waziristan area of FATA (Federally Administered Tribal Area) in first week of September

2006 which gave *Taliban* a free run of the area. Ahmed Rashid, a renowned Pakistani analyst considers it a blow to counter-terrorism struggle and has opined that this agreement would set up a safe haven for *Al Qaeda* and the *Taliban*. His warning seems to be coming true since the incidents of *Taliban* attacks against the NATO forces increased threefold between beginning of September and towards end of October 2006 in the Afghan provinces bordering Waziristan. And with thaw in winter, frequency and intensity of *Taliban* attacks on NATO forces has again picked up. Further, Waziristan has completely become *Talibanised* with *Taliban*'s summary style of justice being dispensed and local *Taliban* chiefs issuing edicts to fight the foreign infidels in Afghanistan.

NATO Commanders fighting *Taliban* have expressed dismay at George Bush and Tony Blair for declining to call Musharraf bluff that Pakistan and ISI are not aiding *Taliban*. Vice President Dick Cheney also continues to be a strong supporter of Musharraf's way of approaching the Afghan issue. During a tri-partite meeting between President Bush, Afghan President Hamid Karzai and Musharraf on 28 September 2006 at Washington, President Bush declined to raise the question of Pakistan's support to *Taliban* out of Quetta sanctuaries in Balochistan province of Pakistan. Later on General David Richards, the head of NATO forces in Afghanistan was expected to present mounting evidence of *Taliban* headquarters being in Quetta and the extensive involvement of ISI in aiding *Taliban* during his visit to Islamabad in early October 2006. However, after his meetings with President General Musharraf and other top generals of Pakistan, General Richards came back appreciating Pakistan's role and "thanked the President, the government, the armed forces and security agencies of Pakistan for the excellent cooperation being extended in the fight against terrorism." Short of singing paeans he became convinced about the Pakistani point of view that vast majority of Afghan problems emanated from within the country and *Taliban* activity was being funded through narcotics trade and other criminal activities. Further, with mounting evidence of Pakistan's involvement in supporting *Taliban*, Dick Cheney again visited Islamabad in the end of February 2007. Reports suggested that it was to give a tough message to Musharraf but on official plane, it was mentioned that the trip was mostly to praise Pakistan's contribution to war on terror.

Not only had NATO Chief extolled virtues of Pakistan's role, he had emulated Pakistan by concluding a Waziristan like truce with *Taliban* in Musa Qala a district of Helmand province of southern Afghanistan where British troops casualties have been the highest. NATO forces and troops of the Afghan National Army have also withdrawn from the Babrak Tana area in the Ali Sher districts of the South-eastern province of Khost in mid-October 2006 upon the mediation of tribal elders. The Taliban spokesperson referred to the pull out as another major victory of the *Taliban* against NATO forces. By end October 2006 talks were also underway between the *Taliban* and NATO forces - through tribal elders - over the pullout of troops from 12 districts along the Pakistan Afghan border. The talks revolved around *Taliban* making concessions to the NATO forces and agreeing not to attack their bases in those Afghan provinces where the deal is signed. This does not bode well for shape of things to come in Afghanistan. By the end of February 2007, *Taliban* was virtually ruling Musa Kala.

NATO would be fighting for many years in Afghanistan unless *Taliban's* head in Pakistan is removed. All these new 'peace zones' would be sanctuaries for rest and recuperation and training bases for further Taliban operations. Frederic Grare, an American analyst opines, "Pakistan's agents can help vary the intensity of Taliban attacks and, therefore, pressure the Afghan Government and the US and NATO forces at will, according to the needs of the moment, while it maintains the fiction that it is still committed to the war on terror, thus preserving its usefulness and maintaining its standing in the international community increasingly trapped by its own priorities and disconnected from on-the-ground realities."

Pakistan has perfected the art of fighting proxy wars for achieving its foreign policy objectives and political goals. Though it may have met with mixed success in Jammu and Kashmir it is looking for a major success in the shape of installing a *Taliban* regime in Kabul beholden to Islamabad. Internally, Pakistan's military establishment has been described as a predatory institution which, at first, creates threat to security and then offers itself to neutralise the threat so created. And in the bargain it remains in the driving seat appropriating most of the national resources of Pakistan. It can easily be perceived that it is following similar strategy with the US and NATO by using *Taliban*. Thus, a number of American and

western analysts have concluded that removing Pakistan military's stranglehold on reigns of power and democratising Pakistan is a strategic imperative and key to improving security and stability in Afghanistan.

Afghanistan's Internal Dynamics

All the problems of Afghanistan are not because of Pakistan or other external players. President Karzai has not been able to exert control over warlords and tribal chiefs who still wield considerable power in their strongholds. Some of them have been allowed to retain their militias along with their arms which militate against the aims and objectives of disarmament, demobilisation and rehabilitation programme enshrined in Bonn Process. Karzai had made some of the warlords who were accused of serious crimes as police chiefs thus eroding his reputation. This has also compounded the difficult problems of enforcing law and order and ensuring good governance.

Drug production in 2006 has reached record levels with almost 60 per cent rise in its growth since 2005 and it is heading for another high in 2007. Proceeds from sale of drugs and drug trafficking are fuelling the insurgency as well as contribute to worsening law and order situation since *Taliban*, warlords and Tribal Chiefs stand to gain from opium cultivation. Government has not been able to find alternative means of livelihood for the poor farmers and opium cultivation is the only attractive occupation. Weak government enforcement, corruption in the government and police force and protection offered by *Taliban* to opium farmers in lieu of partaking of some of the proceeds exacerbates the problems of building a stable nation state.

In addition to the above are the problems of building a strong Afghan National Army (ANA) and Afghan National Guard and Afghan National Police. The US goal was to train 70,000 ANA soldiers by 2007 out of which 31,000 have been trained and mid-term objective was to reach strength of 62,000 troops. But now the US has surmised that Afghanistan does not have enough internal resources to support such a large army. There have been many desertions in ANA and the quality of soldiers also suffers because of general lack of education. Poor wages and ethnic tensions also have negative effects on the combat value of ANA. There are

reports of security forces having been infiltrated by *Taliban* and pro *Al Qaeda* elements. ANG and ANP have similar problems. There are inadequate numbers of policemen for border guarding tasks which is further compounded by rampant corruption and inadequate motivation.

Further, the enormous aid promised by the international community under the Bonn Agreement of December 2001, has not been translated on the ground as tangible benefits to the poor and common man. About 40 per cent of the aid may be real and rest is phantom aid. Large portion of this is taken away by the fancy salaries of the members of the NGOs and other foreigners working in Afghanistan. Afghan government has not had much say in the utilisation of the aid provided by the foreign governments. This has not only eroded the authority of the government but has also deprived it from laying down priorities.

America has been spending on the average one billion dollars per month in Afghanistan for military operations. Till fiscal year 2005, it has spent \$ 67 billion for defence related expenditure in Afghanistan whereas for reconstruction programmes from years 2001 to 2005, it has spent \$ 28 billion and for trade security forces, it has spent one billion dollars. For fiscal year 2006, the US has budgeted for \$ 920 million for reconstruction, law enforcement and counter narcotics. Going by South Asian standards, these are colossal amount of funds. Some of the activities being undertaken by civilian officials, western contractors and NGOs can be economically outsourced to countries like India to get best value for money.

However, Afghan Compact of February 2006 and a successor to the Bonn process promises to remove the short comings with the aid of international community. In the Interim - Afghan National Development Strategy (I-ANDS) which is based on likely aid to be provided, the Afghan government has made a five year plan to address the problems of security, governance, social and economic development. A 15 year development has also been planned which is largely based on foreign aid to be received since Afghanistan would not be able to generate adequate internal resources for development. Therefore, international community has to remain committed to play a larger role in both security and development in the near and long term future.

India's Goals in Afghanistan

India, the US, NATO, CAR nations and even Iran share similar goals in Afghanistan because all support a peaceful, stable, democratic and prosperous Afghanistan, which should never be allowed to become a haven for terrorists. The visit of Prime Minister Manmohan Singh to Afghanistan in August 2005 was the first by an Indian Prime Minister after a hiatus of 30 years. India, itself the largest democracy, has been supporting the movement of Afghanistan towards the goal of sovereign and democratic state. India has extended aid of \$ 650 million out of which over \$ 300 million have already been utilised for a number of projects which would help recovery of Afghanistan. Additional \$100 million have been granted to Afghanistan during Foreign Minister Pranab Mukherjee's visit to Afghanistan in January 2007. Some of the areas of assistance are cooperation in development projects, health, education, community development and agricultural research. \$ 50 million have been earmarked for rural development programmes in 100 villages based on the Indian experience. \$ 80 million have been earmarked for rebuilding hydro electric plant in Heart and another \$ 100 million would be spent towards constructing power lines to Kabul. However, the most symbolic contribution towards fledgling Afghan democracy has been the construction of Afghan parliamentary building in Kabul at a cost of \$ 25 million.

India has also been endeavouring to encourage trade, commerce and integration of Afghan economy within the region and has brought in Afghanistan as a member of SAARC in November 2005. Afghanistan's membership of SAARC would be advantageous for economic reconstruction and it would also be a great opportunity for member countries to benefit from possible opening of a corridor between South and Central Asian countries. However, in this age of globalisation, Pakistan continues to follow obscurantist policies and denies transit facilities to India for trade, commerce and even aid for reconstruction and development of Afghanistan linking grant of such rights with solution of the Jammu and Kashmir problem. This not only deprives Pakistan of transit fees, but it also deprives Afghanistan of much needed revenue and trading opportunities through access to vast markets of South Asia, Central Asia and beyond. For Afghanistan, to exploit its unique position as a land bridge between Central and South Asia it needs

cooperation of both Pakistan and India as also of other neighbouring countries. One of the major thrusts of American foreign policy has been to encourage India and Pakistan towards rapprochement on their outstanding issues.

Implications for India

With the *Taliban* resurgence on both sides of the Durand Line and Pakistan having signed peace deals in North and South Waziristan and dilution of Pakistan's sovereignty in these areas, contours of a de facto independent Pashtoonistan are emerging. Pakistan's efforts and resources are directed towards *Taliban* resurgence which may not be bad from Indian point of view. Apparently, there is no need to get into a zero sum game with Pakistan or get involved in a messy situation in Afghanistan. It is also being widely perceived that Pakistan is involved in a 'wasteful extravaganza' and its ambitions of controlling Afghanistan are unlikely to bear fruit because of nature of fiercely independent Afghans. In the long run, *Taliban* is likely to create more problems for Pakistan rather than solve any or add to so called "strategic depth" of Pakistan. Further, no Afghan government, including the Pashtoon-dominated *Taliban* regime that was recognised by Pakistan, has accepted the division of Pashtoos along Durand Line. Afghan leaders consider the British-drawn; colonial-era border line deprives Afghanistan of Pashtoon territory now inside Pakistan.

Sending of Indian troops to Afghanistan at present juncture and opening a proxy front against Pakistan would be the most imprudent step. It is likely to cost us the goodwill of common Afghan people who, in any case, resent any kind of foreign interference. And as the history bears witness whether it were British during the Anglo-Afghan wars of 19th Century or Soviet Russia or even Alexander the Great, all were routed by proud and freedom loving Afghan fighters over a period of time.

Better alternative would be to revert to exclusive focus on people-to-people relations and strengthen our economic, cultural and historical bonds with the Afghan people. We need to extend additional aid and promote reconstruction and development projects especially in peaceful areas in North and West of Afghanistan. Also, there is a need to have a re-look on our opening of four consulates in Afghanistan, especially in the areas of conflict. If

consulates are not serving any useful purpose the same may be relocated, their number reduced or may even be closed till situation improves. However, there is also a view that consulates in the area of conflict do serve as a pressure point in the strategic games being played in the arena and it cannot be said that they are devoid of any use.

Another question which arises is whether there is a need to seek political accommodation with *Taliban*. *Taliban* and its philosophy go against the grain of nature and ideology of Indian state. However, it also needs to be noted that *Taliban* is not listed as a terrorist entity either in any official list of the US or its allies, perhaps, because of political expediency. There is also a gnawing feeling among the western nations and the US that eventually they may have to reach some understanding with *Taliban* if further losses are to be avoided and peace and stability is to be restored. But as long as the US and NATO stay in Afghanistan, *Taliban* is unlikely to gain complete control. At present, India needs to strengthen its relations with nationalist elements amongst Pashtoons and other dominant ethnic groups in order to pursue its interests in Afghanistan. Further, in politico-diplomatic matters one can never take an absolute position. However, at the present juncture our interests would be well served by strengthening all *non-Taliban* forces in Afghanistan.

Conclusion

The development of Afghanistan and improving the lot of its people cannot take place unless there is peace and stability and further, peace and security would be as a consequence of development and prosperity. This is a mutually interdependent phenomenon and international community has to address comprehensively all dimensions of problems of Afghanistan in moving it towards a strong, stable and a vibrant democratic nation.

Over two and half decades of strife in Afghanistan has impoverished a proud nation with no stability in sight because of policies being pursued by some of the regional and extra regional players. Internally, a weak government has not been able to force the rule of law and provide health, education, employment opportunities and food security to the populace. Thus, a resurgent *Taliban* is gaining strength. Ethnic divisions further complicate the

problem of restoring peace and stability in Afghanistan. Near term future of Afghanistan is likely to be a continuum of the present situation. Prospects of achieving peace and stability in Afghanistan in mid-term to long term period would be brighter if all the benchmarks and timelines outlined in Afghan Compact can be achieved to some degree with the help of international community. Failure in Afghanistan would impact both the regional and global security adversely and Pakistan and India would be the worst sufferers of unstable and insecure Afghanistan.

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