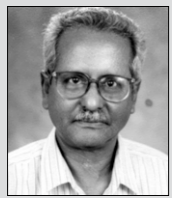


## Pakistan should recast its Afghan policy



M.J. ZAHEDI

THE speed, at which the Taliban retreated from Kabul after putting up a stiff resistance on the northern front, must have surprised many. But to the knowledgeable the fall of the capital city had been imminent already.

That is perhaps why during his meeting with President George Bush, President Pervez Musharraf had stressed the need to stop the Northern Alliance from entering Kabul until an alternate government was in place to fill the vacuum. Yet another reason to hold back the Taliban may have been its track record of bloody reprisals.

Yet President Bush was 'very pleased' when Alliance troops entered the Afghan capital. So, as reported in the Press, were many of the Kabul residents. They celebrated the 'liberation' with expres-

sions of defiance against the Taliban rule which they considered oppressive: it, among others, prohibited girls from going to school, women from working in offices or other places and men from having clean-shaven faces. Small joys of life as listening to music or playing football in shorts, even taking pictures, were prohibited. All these were in line with the instructions of the Taliban's ultra-conservative peasant-cleric leader, Mullah Omar. So young men thronged barbershops, women came out without 'burqa' and a female voice announced on Kabul radio the news of the Taliban's ouster.

However amidst all the joys and festivity, there were some disturbing scenes too. Bodies of Arab and Pakistani volunteers who fought on the side of the Taliban were lying in ditches along the streets. The Alliance soldiers, it seems, had reserved special brutality for these fighters: torturing them to death and even mutilating their bodies. The same thing had happened earlier in Mazar-e-Sharif. In one incident alone in Mazar-e-Sharif the Alliance soldiers reportedly killed, in cold blood, some 100 Pakistanis holed up in a school building after they had surrendered. Over all, as many as 600 Taliban fighters, mostly foreign volunteers, and their supporters are reported to have been massacred

### LETTER FROM KARACHI

**Apart from the fact that Pakistan's strategic, ethnic and economic interests have remained unmet, the country also suffered from several terrorists' attacks whose perpetrators were believed to be based in Afghanistan. Fear of terrorism has gripped the country. If this 'cost' is any guide, it must give up the illusions of strategic depth, ethnic appeasement and economic benefit.**

by the Alliance in Mazar-i-Sharif.

From the manner in which Arabs and Pakistanis and their supporters have been targeted, that seems to have happened as part of a well thought out strategy, prepared with, according to an editorial in the daily *Business Recorder*, the 'connivance of the Americans'. After all, one of the main objectives of America's ongoing war in Afghanistan, the paper said, is to root out the Al Qaeda infrastructure as well as its volunteer force. Needless to say, such killings violate the UN conventions as also the common rules of civilised behaviour.

The situation in Afghanistan is still fluid. Besides the Taliban are expected to make a strong last stand from their stronghold in the south before they are completely routed. They may again present situations where UN peacekeeping troops would be needed to prevent

atrocities against those who may surrender as also the non-combatant supporters of the Taliban. General Musharraf has rightly emphasized the urgency of demilitarization of Kabul so that atrocities are avoided. He has also called for the immediate setting up of a multiethnic and representative government there.

It is unfortunate that even though all concerned do agree on all these important points and also recognise that the situation needs to be addressed on an emergency basis, they are taking too long to act. The Foreign Ministers of the six-plus-two countries, have been meeting in New York but without any tangible outcome yet. Also under consideration is a proposal for putting in place UN peacekeeping troops comprising neutral Muslim nations such as Turkey and Bangladesh. Perhaps some decision will be

taken at talks between Afghan and UN representatives in Bonn.

The UN must expedite all these measures and move in step with the military events that are fast overtaking a much-needed political response. Above all, a plan and a decision must come out of the Bonn meeting.

Naturally, Pakistan's Afghan policy too has come in for a lot of discussion. Many observers, writing in the local newspapers, feel that from the very inception, Pakistan's policy has been wrong. First, Pakistan antagonised the USSR by joining the American camp. So much so that the Soviets said that Pakistan was in a state of undeclared war with them in Afghanistan. But when (with the withdrawal of the Soviets), Pakistan outlived its utility to the USA, the cold war ally started painting Pakistan in the darkest of colours. Pakistan was even threat-

ened with dire consequences if it did not follow the 'right path'.

All this changed dramatically when General Musharraf executed a 180-degree turn, disowning the Taliban and assuring unstinted cooperation with President Bush in his 'war against terrorism'. The UN now has a formal basis to pursue its plan to establish a 'broad-based, multi-ethnic and fully representative government' in Afghanistan.

Most observers say that from the very beginning, Pakistan's Afghan policy has been wrong. Pakistan played into Indian hands by treating Afghans as enemies and their leaders as Indian or Soviet stooges. Pakistan assumed that Afghanistan was its backyard, which would provide strategic depth in the event of an outbreak of hostilities on its eastern borders. The assumption took on a whole new colour when the Taliban triumphed in 1996.

Their rise to power was celebrated with such fervour in Pakistan as if Afghanistan had become its fifth province.

But the assumption proved wrong so much so that the Pakistan leaders found Taliban-run Afghanistan safe enough to visit. Even Interior Minister Moinuddin Haider was given a red-hot send-off when he was returning from his only visit to Kabul.

Pakistan assumed that Taliban's rise to power meant the rise of Pakhto-speakers in Afghanistan. Pakistan celebrated the Taliban's rise to power at the expense of its Dari-speaking majority. By shifting power balance in favour of a Pakhto-speaking Taliban, Pakistan presumably wanted to appease their brethren-in-blood who live on this side of Afghanistan from Bolan to Chitral. This too was a wrong, rather an ignorant, assumption, many say. Pakhtun Pakistanis are quite different from their likes inside Afghanistan; they are moderate in their theological beliefs, receptive to social change and attuned to the modern world. With the continuation of Taliban control in Afghanistan, Pakhtun-Pakistanis saw no chance of a regrowth of a liberal leadership in Afghanistan. And many of them mince no words in blaming Islamabad for stripping Afghans of the leaders moulded in moderation, liberalism and patriotism, values Pakhtun-Pakistanis espouse and

embrace. Economically, too, Pakistan saw gain for itself in the Taliban's victory in Afghanistan. But here, too, Pakistan was wrong because Taliban's control over 90 per cent of Afghanistan did not translate into safe trade routes to and from central Asia. On the contrary, the Taliban scared off potential investors who were willing to invest billions of dollars in projects of energy production, especially in on- and-offshore energy supply lines.

Apart from the fact that Pakistan's strategic, ethnic and economic interests have remained unmet, the country also suffered from several terrorists' attacks whose perpetrators were believed to be based in Afghanistan. Fear of terrorism has gripped the country. If this 'cost' is any guide, it should lead Pakistanis to recast its Afghan policy. It must give up the illusions of strategic depth, ethnic appeasement and economic benefit. Pakistan must keep in mind that it cannot appease Pakhtun Pakistanis by causing a seismic shift in the demographic balance of Balochistan and the tribal area of Pakhtunkhwa, both of which have become armories of religious zealots. Nor can Pakistan reap economic dividends from a 'passage economy' that moves on the back of mules.

M J Zahedi is an eminent columnist in Pakistan and formerly the Editor of the *Khaleez Times*.

## Broad-based Afghan government-easier said than done

DILIP HIRO writes from London

ON 12 November, the Eight-Country Group on Afghanistan called for the establishment of "a broad-based government" in that war-torn country. Two days later, the United Nations Security Council passed a resolution calling for a government that should be "broad-based, multi-ethnic, and fully representative of all the Afghan people."

Neither the Eight-Country Group comprising the six immediate neighbours of Afghanistan, plus Russia and the United States nor the UN used the term 'National unity government'.

And that omission neatly sums up the magnitude of the problem facing the international community: The absence in Afghanistan of nationalism, the shared feeling by citizens of belonging to a single nation.

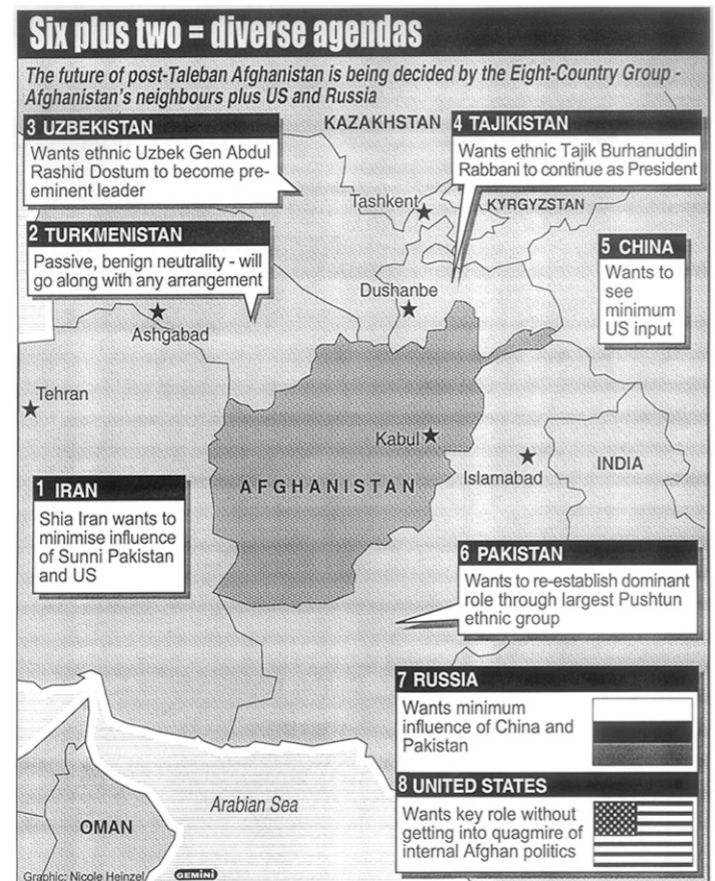
For long, geography, history and economics have combined to block a natural progression by Afghanistan's inhabitants from tribalism and loyalty to one's ethnic group, to the modern concept of pride in being part of a diverse and larger nation-state.

Afghanistan's mountainous terrain has created small, isolated communities, suspicious of all those who do not belong to their clan or tribe. Each of its four major ethnic groups looks across the national frontiers and draws sustenance from the neighbouring fellow-ethnics.

It is these often-conflicting ethnic and geo-political agendas that need to be resolved as the UN tackles the mammoth task of building a broad-based post-Taliban government in Afghanistan.

The ethnic Tajik Afghans, comprising a little over 22 per cent of the population, are focused on Tajikistan, with the Tajik Jamiat-e-Islamic party of 61-year-old Afghan President Burhanuddin Rabbani sheltering in Tajikistan until his arrival in Kabul on 14 November. Tajikistan President Imam Ali Rahmanov would like Rabbani to

Since the fall of Kabul to the anti-Taliban Northern Alliance forces on 13 November, the UN is tackling the task of cobbling together a 'broad-based' government in Afghanistan. Whether such a government will last in a nation shorn of any notions of nationhood is another matter altogether. Gemini News Service reports on the competing agendas of Afghanistan's diverse ethnic populations.



continue as president in the post-Taliban setup.

Uzbek Afghans (15 per cent) look to Uzbekistan, for whom Gen. Abdul Rashid Dostum is the chief proxy. Uzbekistan President Islam Karimov would want Dostum, the victor of the battle of Mazar-e-Sharif, to exercise considerable power in the post-Taliban regime.

Since ethnic Turkmens are the smallest in size (about three per cent), their kinship with fellow

Turkmens in Turkmenistan does not count for much. Not surprisingly Turkmenistan has been a passive neighbour of Afghanistan, no matter which regime is in power in Kabul.

Then there are the Pushtun Afghans, the largest tribe (45 per cent) who are linked to fellow Pushtuns in Pakistan, which has been the predominant neighbour of Afghanistan.

With the collapse of the Taliban -

- a creation of Pakistan's ISI intelligence agency - Pakistan is scrambling for a foothold in the rapidly changing political and diplomatic scenario.

The ethnic Hazaras (about 11 per cent), inhabiting mainly central Afghanistan, belong to the Shia sect of Muslims, and look to Shia-majority Iran for support. Their leader, Karim Khalili, has been a long-time ally of Iran, receiving in the past both weapons and money from Tehran.

For Iran it is important to reduce the historic influence in Afghanistan of Sunni-dominated Pakistan, a long-term ally of America, with which Tehran continues to have strained relations.

In that sense, Iran partly shares the agenda of China, which wants to minimise the influence of America. But, unlike Iran, China wants to continue to maintain its strong links with Pakistan.

Of the two non-neighbours of Afghanistan, Russia and America, Moscow is intent on ensuring the reduction in the influence of the Pakistan-China duo.

As for Washington, the Bush administration does not seem to be willing to deepen US involvement in this quagmire of Afghanistan to the extent that existed in the 1980s during the Cold War.

As an Afghan proverb has it, 'Me and my brother against my cousin; and me, my brother and my cousin against the rest of the world.'

Economically, the failure of Afghanistan to graduate beyond medieval subsistence farming with very little surplus to trade has contributed to maintaining the barriers to graduation to nationhood.

Such an economy also means minimum governance of citizens,

whether at the local or national level. Afghanistan today is the least governed country in the world. Aside from the residents of a few large cities, Afghans have scant contact with their government; and this too militates against the emergence of the idea of a nation-state.

Until the collapse of the Soviet Union 10 years ago, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan were part of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, the successor to Tsarist Russia. And it was Tsarist Russia and imperial Britain, the 19<sup>th</sup> century superpowers engaged in the Great Game in Central Asia, who delineated the final boundaries of modern Afghanistan in 1895 as a buffer state between Russia and British India.

Keen to protect its much-prized Indian Empire from the Tsar's ambitions, Britain wanted to ensure that Russia did not share a common border with its Eastern Empire.

That led to the carving out of the Wakhan corridor -- a tongue protruding from Afghanistan's north-east corner, which gives the country a short border with China, which in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century did not threaten Imperial Britain.

Being the officially agreed buffer between two superpowers meant that Afghanistan continued to maintain its independence. It became one of the few non-European countries to do so.

In retrospect, lack of European colonization may be an important factor in retarding Afghans' progression from being a tribal-ethnic entity to a modern nation-state.

In the 1980s, the Soviet military intervention in Afghanistan created a situation analogous to an imperialist power exercising authority in a colonized country.

In response, the Afghan Mujahedin rallied round the twin slogans of nationalism and Islam in their armed struggle against European atheists -- the Soviet Communists -- that lasted merely a decade.

Due to the comparatively short span of time involved, the sprouting nationalism among Afghan Mujahedin did not grow strong enough to subordinate the centuries-old tribal-ethnic loyalties.

Once the Soviets left in 1989, depriving the Mujahedin of a common enemy, the nationalist element in the Mujahedin ranks evaporated. And an extremist form of Islam, enforced by the Taliban, proved inadequate to hold together the four major ethnic groups.

Little wonder that once the Mujahedin had succeeded in overthrowing the leftist government in Kabul -- a remnant of the Soviet days -- in April 1992, the traditional ethnic rivalries came to the fore and culminated in a civil war along ethnic lines.

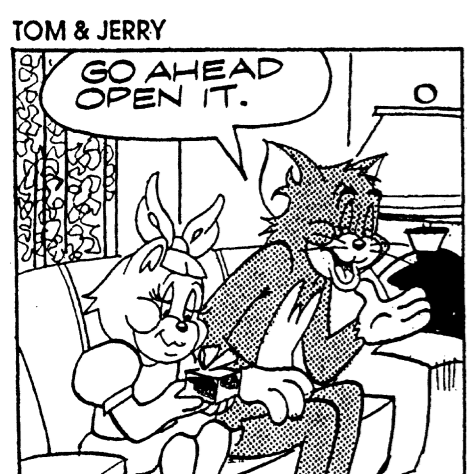
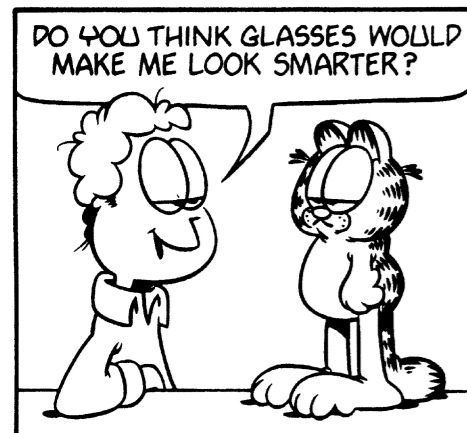
Among those who became fed up with such internecine fighting among the Afghans was one Osama bin Laden, the man now blamed for the 11 September terror attacks on the US.

In disgust, bin Laden returned to his home in Saudi Arabia.

Under pressure from the fast-moving developments, a 'multi-ethnic' patchwork will probably be cobbled together at the UN, but it is unlikely to last long, given the absence of a national identity.

Dilip Hiro is the author of 'Between Marx And Muhammad: The Changing Face Of Central Asia' and most recently of 'Neighbours, Not Friends: Iraq And Iran After The Gulf Wars'.

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