

US mission in Afghanistan: Doomed?

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President Bush's decision in 2003 to attack Iraq, leaving the mission in Afghanistan incomplete, and the country's history are combining to produce the same results as the Soviet invasion in the backdrop of a resurgent Taliban and militancy that has risen alarmingly in recent times. The gloomy scenario has been brought into international attention by the Ambassadors of Great Britain and Russia in Kabul.

The British Ambassador Sir Shehard Cowper-Coles' assessment came to press when a secret telegram from the French Deputy Chief of Mission in Kabul, who had a one-to-one meeting with him on September 2nd, was leaked to the press. In the assessment of the British Ambassador, the "current situation is bad and getting worse; so is corruption and the Government has lost all trust" and that the regime of President Karzai is surviving because of foreign forces "who are slowing down and complicating and eventual exit from the crisis which will be dramatic". Sir Shehard felt that the American strategy "is doomed to fail" and Britain should "dissuade the American presidential candidates from getting more bogged down". Sir Shehard recommended a dictator to save Afghanistan.

The British Foreign Office, quite understandably, denied any truth in the leaked telegram. That notwithstanding, the Soviet Ambassador in Kabul gave an interview in October on similar lines. Ambassador Zamir Kabulov's views are more relevant because of his background. He worked for the KGB in Afghanistan during the Soviet invasion. He was also an advisor in the 1990s to the UN peacekeeping envoy during the turbulent period in the mid 1990s before the Taliban captured power in Kabul. Ambassador Kabulov said that the US led mission in Afghanistan is committing the same mistakes as the failed Soviet invasion such as focusing on the cities leaving the countryside unattended where stirrings of opposition grew into full blown insurgency that they eventually failed to contain. The increasing number of troops that eventually reached 147,000 added to their unpopularity as they failed to understand Afghanistan's "irritative allergy" or a deep dislike for foreign occupation, which in the past led them to end all foreign occupation, including the British in the 19th century. According to Ambassador Kabulov, "the more foreign troops you have roaming the country, the more the irritative allergy toward them is going to be provoked." There are 20,000 troops, including 18,000 from US under

Operation Enduring Freedom and 47,000 under International Security Assistance Force from 40 countries, mainly NATO members that includes 17,000 US troops. The crucial mistake Soviet Union made was to stay after changing the regime, one that the US has also repeated. Ambassador Kabulov concluded that the US mission would fail the same way the Soviet invasion did two decades ago.

Both Ambassadors have made compelling arguments that reflect ground realities where chaos and insurgency led by the Taliban has reached almost a crescendo, making the Karzai Government ineffective and the war on terror seriously threatened. Some members of NATO forces in Afghanistan have also spoken out publicly in similar ways. Outgoing British Commander Brigadier Mark Carleton-Smith told a London newspaper, also in October, that military victory in Afghanistan "is neither feasible nor desirable". Even the Bush administration officials in a recent secret meeting with officials of Senator Obama and Senator McCain have delivered the same grim message: the situation in Afghanistan is getting worse.

In contrast, the US with her international partners have invested a great deal to win the war on terror that in 7 years has helped Afghanistan achieve a democratic constitution; an elected President; an elected parliament; and in addition to substantial infrastructure development, a GDP now worth US\$ 21.5 billion. Following improvement of security in Iraq, foreign Islamic militants have moved to Afghanistan making the region, in the words of Senator Obama, the new frontier in the war against terror. Leaving now would mean letting the Taliban win power militarily that would be unacceptable for obvious reasons. A change of US strategy in Afghanistan is therefore a must to win that war.

The main problem in such a review is of course how to deal with a resurgent Taliban. In July, President Bush signed a secret order to empower US troops in Afghanistan to carry out attacks by land inside Pakistan from bases in Afghanistan to take out Taliban sanctuaries without informing Pakistan. It suspected that Pakistan's military intelligence, the ISI, has been making earlier aerial attacks ineffective by giving the Taliban and Al Qaeda elements advance information. Unfortunately, this strategy is not working because the US led attacks inside Pakistan have failed to take out the sanctuaries, causing instead more death of innocent people in Pakistan. Further, it has strained USA-Pakistan collaboration without which the war on terror cannot be won in the region.



The US, to help rebuild Afghanistan, must deal with the resurgence of the Taliban by keeping Pakistan in the loop and taking into account what motivates Pakistan to back the Taliban. The Taliban was created by Pakistan and the US to contain the Soviets. The US left Afghanistan once the Soviets left, leaving the Pakistanis alone with 2 million Afghan refugees and deeply involved in Afghanistan in a manner where it was impossible for them to withdraw. Pakistan continued to assist the Taliban with arms and training and eventually helped them to power in Kabul.

Pakistan's support for the Taliban has also been influenced by security and territorial compulsion that require a friendly Government in Kabul. Since 1947, Pakistan and Afghanistan have been at odds over the drawing of the Durand Line. All

Governments in Afghanistan have refused to accept this line as the boundary between the two countries by refusing to accept Pakistan as a successor state to the British rule. The fact that a portion of Afghanistan's major ethnic group, the Pashtuns, also lives in Pakistan makes it imperative for Pakistan to keep the Durand line intact. It can only be assured by a government in Kabul friendly towards her that led Pakistan to back the Taliban. Attempts to break the nexus were made when General Musharraf joined the US' war on terror, but these were at the lower level of Pakistan's intelligence who had built the nexus over many years; it never really withered away. The nexus has come to surface in a pronounced manner since Musharraf's departure. The new administration in USA should therefore use its influ-

ence in Kabul to take up Pakistan's concern over her territorial integrity vis-à-vis Afghanistan so that Pakistan does not have to depend on the Taliban to give her that assurance. The Pakistanis are also concerned over India's role in Afghanistan. Mutual antagonism towards Islamabad has historically drawn Kabul and New Delhi closer, increasing Pakistan's security concerns and her need for a friendly Government, like the Taliban, in Kabul. The US, that now has more leverage with New Delhi after the signing of the civil nuclear deal, should also use her influence in building greater and better trilateral cooperation involving India, Pakistan, and Afghanistan.

The ability of Islamic militant forces worldwide has weakened and within these elements, serious doubts have been raised

about terrorism as a strategy. A move towards negotiating with these forces in Afghanistan at this point in time, with a new administration coming to office in Washington, may not be an idea to be dismissed hastily. Former US Ambassador to the UN Richard Holbrooke, speaking in New York University last month said it would be "a very good thing" if negotiating with some elements of the Taliban brought them to the political process while under Saudi initiative, elements of the Taliban and members of the Karzai Government have already met in Saudi Arabia. Afghan officials are also talking to the Taliban in Kabul. Writing in the current issues of Foreign Affairs, Barnett E Rubin and Ahmed Rashid (author of the incisive book "Taliban: Militant Islam") have mentioned that the only way to stabilize Afghanistan is through "a major diplomatic initiative involving all the stakeholders" including Pakistan and Iran.

Unfortunately, both Senator McCain and president elect Obama have stated publicly that they would commit more troops to win the war on terror. President Bush has already signed 8,000 additional troops to arrive in Afghanistan in January and a request for 15,000 additional troops from General David McKiernan, the top American commander in Afghanistan, is pending. This could only intensify and complicate matters for the worse. The new US administration must also consider that the current violence is shaking the will of Europeans to continue to contribute troops to the NATO mission.

The new administration in Washington must seriously review the military option in favour of the political and diplomatic ones. Increasing US military presence to destroy the resurgent Taliban and other militants opposing the Karzai Government by force, a policy pursued with some success in Iraq, would only turn the predictions of the Russian and the British Ambassadors into prophecy. Also, Afghanistan will elect a new President next year. Hamid Karzai has not proved effective. Side by side with political and diplomatic efforts, the new US administration should also look for a replacement for Karzai, someone tougher and more effective.

The new administration must commit more funds for national building efforts in key areas of countering narcotics, strengthening governance and economic development, building infrastructure and jobs and humanitarian assistance while dealing with the major task of security through diplomacy and political maneuverings, not by increasing troops, for the better future of Afghanistan.

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Durand Line-the hot spot

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WHEN the British left India in 1947, it left two contested borders, Pakistan-Afghanistan border-the Durand Line, and India-Chinese border, the McMahon Line. Observers believe that one of the most explosive spots on earth today is the so-called Durand Line, the 2640 kilometre border, much of it in harsh mountain country, between Afghanistan and Pakistan. This is where the United States and its NATO allies are battling the Taleban and are facing the possibility of military defeat. The Durand Line was established by the British. It was demarcated and then signed into a treaty on November 12, 1893 between the ruler of Afghanistan, Amir Abdul Rahman Khan, and Sir Mortimer Durand, foreign secretary of what was then British India. The idea was to create a buffer zone to protect

British India from possible Czarist Russian aggression in what was then the 'Great Game' between the British and Russian empires as the Nobel Laureate Kipling described it. When British India was partitioned between India and Pakistan in 1947, the Durand Line became the Pakistan-Afghan border. Successive Afghan rulers repudiated the Durand Line as the border with Pakistan. There was a demand in the past by Afghan rulers to set up an independent Pakhtoonistan state of Pashtun people. Because of the non-recognition of the Durand Line as the international boundary, Afghanistan in 1947 voted against the admission of Pakistan in the UN. Even Hamid Karzai, Afghanistan's current President, has called the Durand Line a "line of hate" because by cutting through tribal lands it artificially divides the Pashtun people, whom Kabul would like to claim as Afghans.

The tribal areas on both sides of the Durand Line have always been autonomous. Anxious to safeguard this autonomy, the tribes resist control by the central government, whether in Islamabad or Kabul. For centuries, their overriding impulse has been to protect their religion and their traditional way of life from foreign interference. Of all the challenges, which the new American administration will face next January, the ongoing war across the Afghan-Pakistan border could be the most difficult and dangerous. They do not want a Western model of society forced upon them. The morality they live by is that of the Pashtunwali Code, which means giving asylum and hospitality to visitors and avenging any slight or attack. The Durand Line was always a hot spot -- and perhaps never more so than in the 1980s, when the United States and Pakistan recruited 'jihadis' from all over the world to fight the Soviets then occupying Afghanistan. Tens of thousands of fighters were trained, armed and funded in the Pakistan tribal areas who then infiltrated across the Durand Line into Afghanistan. The Soviet army was withdrawn in 1989 and the US's strategy was successful in the '90s. But the US had a pyrrhic victory. Currently large numbers of tough, brave, well-armed Pashtun tribesmen as well as sympathizers from many parts of the world have joined the resurgent Taliban movement in a determined effort to expel the invading US forces and their coalition allies just as they expelled the Russians almost 20 years ago. They believe that if they were successful with the Soviet Union, they would also be victorious with the US this time. The United States and Pakistan are now reaping what they sowed. Pashtun nationalism has been aroused. Pashtun leaders on both sides of the border do not recognize the Durand Line that, in any event, has always been porous. The tribal customs, traditions and war-fighting abilities which the Americans mobilized against the Soviets have now been turned against the Americans themselves. Major mistake of the Bush administration was the diversion of US military effort from Afghanistan to Iraq in 2003 - a policy largely driven by neo-cons in Bush's Administration, primarily concerned to destroy Iraq in order to enhance Israel's security environment. But this switching of focus proved immensely costly in men and treasure. US armed forces are overstretched; deficits have ballooned; the shattering of Iraq has handed Iran a strategic victory; the Taliban have been able to regroup their forces on both sides of the Durand Line and are now a formidable force. When the Taliban were in power in Kabul in 2001, poppy cultivation in Afghanistan was greatly reduced. But President George W. Bush's campaign against Al-Qaeda after 9/11, and the overthrow of the Taliban that followed, led to a vast explosion in poppy cultivation and the rise of corrupt warlords along with corrupt Kabul elites. The huge illegal trafficking of drugs and arms across the Durand Line in recent years has contributed to making the tribes rich and confident, and has doomed Bush's "Global War on Terror", at least in these crucial tribal areas. The US-backed Karzai government in

Kabul has a tenuous hold on power. The insurgency has spread to many parts of the country, indeed in Kabul itself. The military situation for the US and NATO is worse today than it has been since 2001. At the same time, neighbour Pakistan has been destabilized. President Asif Ali Zardari, like his predecessor Pervez Musharraf, has to face a public that has become fervently anti-American. Bush's secret authorization last July - recently revealed by the New York Times - to launch US air strikes and ground operations across the Durand Line, without consulting Islamabad, has aroused fury in Pakistan. If it were possible for the US and NATO to deploy an additional 150,000 troops in Afghanistan, the situation may have been reversed. But there is no sign that reinforcements on this scale would be available, or that Western public opinion would tolerate the opening of such a major front.

The Indian-Pakistani conflict over Kashmir and their competition in Afghanistan has contributed to stoking the fires of revolt across the Durand Line. Finding a solution to the Kashmir problem should be a priority for the international community. It would rob Pakistan of a motive for promoting militancy. Afghanistan would also greatly benefit since Pakistan has covertly backed jihadis in that country, if only to counter the growing, American-encouraged influence of India. Pakistan's perennial fear is of being squeezed between India on one flank and an Indian-dominated Afghanistan on the other. Observers believe that a fundamental rethinking of Western strategy is therefore urgently required. This could include:

(a) Winning support from the main regional powers for a peace settlement across the Durand Line -- Pakistan and Afghanistan including India, Iran and even China.

(b) Political negotiations with the Taleban and the Pashtun tribes in both Afghanistan and Pakistan, with the aim of separating them from Al-Qaeda. This would most probably involve guaranteeing the autonomy of the tribal areas, substantial financial subsidies, and offering the Taliban a share in government.

Many analysts say that Afghanistan is likely to overshadow other global concerns next year, such as the existing tension with Russia in the Caucasus, the rise of Iran as a major regional power and its nuclear programme, the search for an honourable exit strategy from Iraq, the impact of the collapsing Arab-Israeli peace process, and even the horrors of global warming. The resolution of conflicts, rather than the use of military force -- whether in Afghanistan or South and Central Asia or in the Middle East -- is the only way to lessen, and ultimately defeat, the threat of terrorism. Hopefully the next US President would initiate a negotiation. Negotiation with opponents does not mean weakness or appeasement.

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EU nations launch air transport fleet initiative

Twelve European Union nations launched a project Nov. 10 to build an EU military air transport fleet to help meet a growing need for planes to carry troops and equipment to the world's trouble spots.

The European Air Transport Fleet (EATF) initiative, which could enter operation in 2014, will pool aircraft like the Airbus A400M and Hercules C130 transporters, the European Defence Agency said in a statement.

"Pooling European aircraft and services will improve the lift capabilities and alleviate a significant European shortfall," said EDA chief Alexander Weis.

The project was endorsed in Brussels on Nov. 10 by defense ministers from Belgium, the Czech Republic, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia and Spain.

Based on their capabilities, the nations will make planes available for use; purchase, provide or exchange flying hours; and pool together resources for training and maintenance.

India signs defence pact with Qatar

On the first-ever visit by an Indian Prime Minister to the hydrocarbon-rich Qatar, India has sought surplus funds from that country to sustain the flow of investments at a time of global credit squeeze, and signed two agreements relating to defence and law enforcement. Describing the defence agreement with Qatar as a "landmark," officials said on Monday that it would "lay out a structure for joint maritime security and training as well as exchange of visits"... *The Hindu*

India, Israel step up defence ties

It seems there are simply no full-stops in the Indo-Israeli strategic partnership despite geopolitical sensitivities as well as allegations of kickbacks in defence deals. All set to further ramp up the already expansive defence ties, a top Indian delegation will leave for Israel on Sunday to discuss joint R&D projects, missile defence, procurements, intelligence-sharing and counter-terrorism strategies, said sources... *The Times of India*.

Beirut and Damascus agree to joint effort against terrorism

By Syria and Lebanon agreed on Monday to boost border controls and anti-terrorism coordination, as the two neighbors took a new step to strengthen ties since recently deciding to establish diplomatic relations.

The decision came during a visit to Damascus by Interior Minister Ziyad Baroud, the first of its kind since the 2005 assassination of former Lebanese Premier Rafik Hariri. Many Lebanese politicians have blamed Syria for the killing, a charge Damascus has vehemently denied... *The Daily Star*

Thousands using Britain as base for Islamic terrorism

Thousands of Islamist militants in the UK are actively supporting jihadist activities at home and abroad, according to a leaked Government document.

The secret report, obtained by a Sunday newspaper, states that Britain will remain "a high-priority target" for international terrorists aligned with al-Qaida for the foreseeable future. The document marked "restricted" was reportedly drawn up by the intelligence branch of the Ministry of Defence, MI5 and Special Branch, and describes the threat from Islamist extremists as "diverse and widely distributed" with the number of terrorists in Britain "difficult to judge". However, it cites estimates from the Joint Terrorism Analysis Centre that there are "some thousands of extremists in the UK committed to supporting jihadist activities, either in the UK or abroad".

It goes on to state: "For the foreseeable future the UK will continue to be a high-priority target for international terrorists aligned with al Qaida."

"It will face a threat from British nationals, including Muslim converts, and UK-based foreign terrorists as well as terrorists planning attacks from abroad."

The new document paints a picture of the kinds of people caught up in extremist activity in the UK. It reads: "The majority of extremists are British nationals of south Asian, mainly Pakistani, origin but there are also extremists from north and east Africa, Iraq and the Middle East, and a number of converts. The overwhelming majority of extremists are male, typically in the 18-30 age range."

The document also states that a number of extremists at large in the UK have been trained in terrorist camps overseas and have "some ability to construct improvised explosive devices, incorporating home-made explosives"... *The Scotland on Sunday*

