

AFGHANISTAN: THERE IS NO END GAME

In view of the announced withdrawal of NATO troops in 2014, there is increasing uncertainty and speculation about the future of Afghanistan, where the US government has failed to achieve its stated objectives. The main beneficiaries of the West's retreat are likely to be the Taliban and Pakistan though they will not be unopposed. Pakistan itself seems to be succumbing to internal disorder and terrorism, mainly of its own creation and Afghanistan may prove too much for Islamabad to deal with whereas India, Iran and Russia could cooperate to prevent a total takeover by the Taliban.

VINOD SAIGHAL

The subject of the future of Afghanistan has taken centre stage primarily because the United States of America (US) has made clear its intention to pull out of the South Asian state. The countries that view this as a positive development are Pakistan and China along with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates—major backers of the *Taliban* prior to 2001—although the latter countries may now have become unsure as to how they should view this development. Naturally, the countries supplying forces for deployment as part of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) would be relieved. It is not yet clear whether the US would exit fully as it did in Iraq or a residual force would remain. Nobody in the country however, will claim “Mission Afghanistan” as a success. The Americans are pulling out of their own volition due to the unpopularity of prolonged deployment, the high casualty rate and their own economic difficulties. They have not been defeated as such, but have decided to cut their losses. Speculation is rife within Afghanistan and in the region as to what the post-pullout situation would be after the departure of foreign forces, deployed primarily to stabilise

Afghanistan and prevent it from again falling into the hands of the *Taliban*. This article looks at the unfolding scenario and the likely fallout on the countries most affected.

THE US

The US has been the prime mover in Afghanistan for over a decade, since 9/11. Some policymakers in Washington are probably unhappy at the turn of events that have obliged them to pull back and leave Afghanistan to its own fate—in the sense that for them the fight is over without achieving their objectives. Henceforth while they may continue to assist the Afghan government, they do not foresee committing large forces again. Allowing the *Taliban* power sharing and control over parts of Afghanistan is evidently their last choice. Simultaneously, allowing Pakistan to assume a major role, even by proxy cannot be a welcome turn of events. On the face of it, for public consumption within the US, the Americans are quitting.

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However, serious thought must have been given for contingency planning for worst-case scenarios. Enough assets and backup have probably been planned to ensure that a Vietnam type collapse of their ally does not take place. Of course, the ground situation in Afghanistan in 2014 would be very different from the situation in South Vietnam when the collapse occurred. Similarly, planning has probably also taken place in the Pentagon to ensure that with the residual force (if maintained) there is no repeat of Dien Bien Phu. Nor for that matter would the Pakistan military or the *Taliban* risk retaliation by the US, which would be fiercer than what took place after 9/11.

Another terrifying scenario is the rising stockpile of nuclear weapons in Pakistan and the internal conditions that never cease to be a matter of concern for the US and much of the world. On 22 April 2009, former Secretary of State Hillary R

Clinton warned in her testimony before the House Foreign Affairs Committee that Pakistan was in danger of falling into terrorist hands. “I think that we cannot underscore enough the seriousness of the existential threat posed to the state of Pakistan by continuing advances, now within hours of Islamabad that are being made by a loosely confederated group of terrorists and others who are seeking the overthrow of the Pakistani state, a nuclear-armed state”. In an interview with *Fox*

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Television on 26 April 2009, she added that although Pakistan had assured the US about the safety of its nuclear weapons, the current volatile situation raised questions about Islamabad’s assurances. “One of our concerns, which we have raised with the Pakistani government and military is that if the worst, the unthinkable were to happen and this advancing *Taliban* encouraged and supported by *al Qaeda* and other extremists, were to essentially topple the government for failure to beat them

back, then they would have the keys to the nuclear arsenal of Pakistan”. Bruce Riedel, a former Central Intelligence Agency officer now with the Brookings Institution, Washington DC and an advisor to President Barack Obama on Afghanistan policy has pointed to the dangers this presents. “The fighting has cast a spotlight on the shaky security of Pakistan’s growing nuclear arsenal—the fastest growing arsenal in the world... Today the arsenal is under the control of its military leaders; it is well protected, concealed and dispersed. But if the country fell into the wrong hands—those of the militant Islamic *jihadists* and *al Qaeda*—so would the arsenal. The US and the rest of the world would face the worst security threat since the end of the Cold War. Containing this nuclear threat would be difficult, if not impossible” (“Pakistan and the Bomb: The Security of the Country’s Nuclear Arsenal is Shaky – What the US needs to do to avert a Crisis, *The Wall Street Journal*, 30 May 2009, available at, <http://online.wsj.com>).

The US and its allies have been concentrating on the nuclear proliferation threat building up in Iran and North Korea. After the Abdul Qadeer Khan episode, Pakistan seems to have been put on the back burner. In fact however, the Pakistani nuclear threat is far more insidious and widespread than is currently assessed in most quarters. Iran's comparative nuclear capability *vis-à-vis* Pakistan on a scale of zero to nine is not even one, while Pakistan hovers around seven or eight. Likewise, while North Korea may be far ahead of Iran, it is not in the same league as Pakistan in the number of nuclear weapons it possesses or is likely to possess. More importantly, North Korea does not have radical groups capable of carrying out terrorist acts of varying intensity across the globe, while Iran to date has limited its reach to Gaza, Lebanon and Syria. Pakistani radical groups in concert with sympathisers in the Pakistan Army and Inter Services Intelligence (ISI) have the potential to capture power in the state in the not too distant future. This means that they could become masters of the Pakistani nuclear arsenal and delivery systems vastly augmented by China and North Korea. A recent report attributed to Shaun Gregory of Bradford University, United Kingdom mentions that *jihadis* have attacked Pakistan's nuclear sites three times (*The Times of India*, 11 August 2009). A headline in the *Indian Express* of 11 January 2009 quoting an article of the *New York Times* stated, "Obama Camp fears Pakistan Nukes falling into Wrong Hands". These are incidents that Western analysts are aware of—there may have been others known only to the Pakistani authorities. Hence, it is far more important for the global community to protect Pakistan's nuclear arsenal from terrorist takeover than to deal with Iran or North Korea. Of course, China would demur, but that is to be expected. The "zero

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option” now being mentioned in some circles in Washington might not be an alternative.

PAKISTAN

Of the countries in the region directly impacted by events in Afghanistan, Pakistan remains the most important. It is not only the country most affected by Afghanistan, but also the country primarily responsible for the worsening

In Pakistan the list of victims of terrorist attacks is expanding rapidly, increasing from 164 casualties in 2003 to 40,000 in 2011. According to official data, damage suffered by the country from 2000 to 2011 exceeded \$70 billion. An important element of the out-of-control terrorist activity has been Pakistan’s direct involvement in military action in Afghanistan and the creation of *mujahideen* units.

situation in Afghanistan. Without going into the history of past events, this article now examines the options open to the Pakistan Army–ISI combine and the tools with which they operate—mainly the Quetta Shura led by Mullah Omar, the Haqqani network and other groupings among the *Taliban* in Afghanistan–Pakistan that surface from time to time. On the face of it, Washington has been extremely generous with Pakistan after the decision to quit was made, leaving behind a residual force whose strength has yet to be determined. Based on past experiences, the *Taliban* moving in

strength into Afghanistan will be backed in every possible way, to enable them to take over a much larger area than is presently envisaged by the Americans. Whether this phase is embarked upon gradually or at a fast pace will depend upon the fighting potential of the Afghan National Army (ANA), the support provided to it by the residual US force and other factors that will surely come into play. In fact, these other interests might turn out to be the most decisive in the outcome in Afghanistan over the coming years.

The strategic depth that the Pakistan Army and its operatives are carving out for themselves might turn out to be a strategic nightmare sooner than they realise

or expect. The Pakistanis have been agitating for the Americans to quit Afghanistan so that they can move in. Ironically, a few years down the line they may rue the fact that the US opted out, as the Americans have possibly provided a modicum of stability to Pakistan. Terrorism has grown into the most destructive phenomenon in the country today. The list of victims of terrorist attacks is expanding rapidly, increasing from 164 casualties in 2003 to 40,000 in 2011. According to official data, damage suffered by the country from 2000 to 2011 exceeded \$70 billion. An important element of the out-of-control terrorist activity now plaguing the country has been Pakistan's direct involvement in military action in Afghanistan and the creation of *mujahideen* units. After the end of military action, they rose to prominence as military and political forces first in Afghanistan and then in Pakistan. Since then they have grown from strength to strength. According to the American analyst George Friedman, Pakistan is losing its "trajectory into the future". This opinion is underpinned by the increasingly chaotic political and social situation, the army's ubiquitous involvement in domestic processes, the poorly regulated economy and the inability of political parties to maintain stability for more than five years. This "institutional vacuum" has been filled by other organisations, mainly terrorist structures.

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IRAN

Iran too shares a long border with Afghanistan. Recently, there have been speculations in certain circles that the Iranians have been aiding the *Taliban* to make things more difficult for the Americans. However, this situation would change dramatically as soon as the Americans pull out, leaving Afghanistan to its own fate with the hope that the ANA would be able to put up a good fight. Whatever the case, the Iranians will not countenance a *Taliban* takeover or even a

major push beyond their acknowledged area of influence in the south and east. Additionally, their policies could converge with those of the Central Asian Republics, India and Russia. Iran may back the militias of a reformed Northern Alliance and in the process become a major stakeholder in Afghanistan at par with Pakistan. The Zaranj–Delaram road built by India confers greater flexibility upon Iran and has opened several access points from the Iranian side into Afghanistan that were not available earlier, thereby reducing the over-dependence of Afghanistan on Pakistan.

THE CENTRAL ASIAN REPUBLICS AND RUSSIA

This paper groups the Central Asian Republics with Russia as the threats they would face from a resurgent *Taliban* would be common. In the past, a major threat was related to sanctuaries provided to groups like the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, which under the leadership of Juma Namangani made deep inroads into the Ferghana Valley and threatened to destabilise Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan,

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Uzbekistan and to a lesser extent Kazakhstan. Another major threat would be from the flow of drugs, although this has continued regardless of the power holder in Kabul. In the late 1990s, when the *Taliban* had taken over most of Afghanistan (with the Panjshiris under Ahmad Shah

Massoud being the only holdout), Russia was in an enfeebled position towards the end of the Yeltsin era. Besides a lack of equipment in the armed forces, the Russians had only a weak, dispirited motorised division on the Afghanistan–Tajikistan border. Had 9/11 not occurred, it is likely that after Massoud's assassination, the *Taliban* would have pushed deeper into Central Asia. In fact, that had been the initial game plan of Pakistan and Saudi Arabia—the main backers of the *Taliban*. This time around however, the situation is very different. Russia is fully prepared to safeguard its interests in Central Asia and Afghanistan, once the Americans pull out.

INDIA

India is the only regional country under consideration that has no contiguity with Afghanistan. Nonetheless, from all indications and statements appearing in the press, it seems to be the most apprehensive about the post-2014 scenario after the Americans leave. The realisation has yet to dawn in India that it was unable to have a meaningful presence in Afghanistan—its aid and development efforts notwithstanding—because up to nearly the very end the US would not countenance it. For most of the period from 2001 onwards, the Americans leant heavily towards Pakistan—this is no longer the case. Circumstances on the ground and poor leadership on the part of the Americans have forced them to reach an accommodation with the *Taliban* and their Pakistani backers. In addition, now towards the end the US government has realised that a greater Indian footprint in Afghanistan could be a stabilising factor. With this in mind, they agreed to the Afghan government coming to a strategic defence agreement with India. This window of opportunity that has been opened for New Delhi could allow it to become an important player post-2014.

First however, the Indian government and strategic community must realise that they have to become a player in the field to achieve objectives. When India starts looking at its obligations to itself and Afghanistan from this perspective the situation could take a dramatic turn for the better. The multiple options available to New Delhi would generally be welcomed in Kabul. The Afghan people generally look upon India favourably as a benign presence compared to other regional players that share their borders. Similarly, nearly all regional countries—apart from those that back the Pakistan–*Taliban* combine—would welcome India as a player and

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strategic partner for stabilising Afghanistan. The US and its Western allies, including most countries from Southeast and East Asia that sent detachments to Afghanistan with the ISAF would also be supportive. The only drawback in this promising picture would not be Pakistan or China (which has taken a back seat, as it is an “all weather friend” and would again be a lead player once the Americans leave) but India itself with its “self-doubt” and tendency to fall between two stools.

AFGHANISTAN

Having examined the powers that have a stake in or are in a position to influence events in Afghanistan, directly or through proxies (China), it emerges that in the ultimate analysis Afghanistan would have to decide its own future. Afghanistan today is very different from the country the *Taliban* ruled over a decade ago. The

The Afghan people generally look upon India favourably as a benign presence. Similarly, nearly all regional countries—apart from those that back the Pakistan–*Taliban* combine—would welcome India as a player and strategic partner for stabilising Afghanistan. The US and its Western allies, including most countries from Southeast and East Asia would also be supportive.

conditions on the ground, the possibilities that have been opened up for the Afghan people, the levels of education and commercial activities have all undergone major transformations. Neither the Afghans nor Afghanistan will be an easy take for the *Taliban* or their backers.

Nonetheless, there are doubts on the efficacy of Afghan responses to major ingresses via Pakistan. There are several reasons for these misgivings. The most important being that if US backed forces with the most modern technologies at their command could not overcome the

Taliban, how will the ANA (whose efficacy is doubted even when the Americans are there), successfully take them on? The second relates to the degree of backing that would be available to the Afghan government and the ANA post-2014 by way of funding and high-end technology including air, heavy artillery and helicopter support. There is no doubt that these apprehensions are reasonable. However, it is unlikely

that the Afghan government and the ANA will be left high and dry once the bulk of US forces is withdrawn. Over the years, there could be a phasing out and when that happens, other donors and backers with a stake in Afghanistan could step in, provided the Afghan government and ANA demonstrate staying power and have not allowed the Pakistan–*Taliban* combine to extend its sway over large areas. Moreover, once the Americans leave the Afghans know that they have to fend for themselves. No major intervention (as by the Soviet Union or the US) would take place again to save Afghanistan from an attack by Pakistan and its proxies. Concomitantly, support for the *Taliban*, wherever it existed, would be downgraded. With the Westerners having pulled out, the only aliens that would remain would be the foreign-backed *Taliban* and their supporters. Thus, it is hoped that clarity of purpose and perception would prevail throughout the country that the Afghans are on their own and the only foreign elements threatening them and their future reside in Pakistan.

The Pushtuns of Afghanistan and Pakistan with support from Islamabad have united against North Atlantic Treaty Organization and US forces but in the process created a new threat for Pakistan. Many Pushtuns residing in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas and the North West Frontier Province have begun to identify Pakistan more as an enemy than as a friend, as Islamabad has allowed Americans and other foreigners to kill Pushtuns. Further, Pakistani troops have also joined in killing Pushtuns under the pretext of eliminating the extremist Pakistani *Taliban*. Thus, it is possible that when the Americans leave, the Greater Pushtunistan Movement could come to the fore. A large section of Pushtuns from both sides of the Durand Line, a much larger group than that supporting the *Taliban*, might well join the fray. Kabul may even ensure that this comes to pass.

Despite doubts about the Afghans' and the ANA's abilities to take on the Pakistan-backed *Taliban* one should not entirely discount their staying power and efficacy. No doubt, there are ethnic and other divisions, however, these could be papered over to a large

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extent once there is a commonality of purpose and clarity about the enemy, from where it is coming and the affliction that would once again be visited on the Afghan people should the *Taliban* be allowed to take over a second time. Hence, in spite of the doubts about the ANA that are being voiced currently, the force may still give a good account of itself. Moreover, the Afghan government and ANA may be making plans to erase the Durand Line, so that the games played on account of the artificial divide cease and the real enemy may be evicted from these territories once and for all.

Powerful leaders in the north of Afghanistan are likely to prepare their militias for a big showdown should the *Taliban* push outwards. Initially, these forces could back the ANA to oust the *Taliban* from Afghanistan. Both the ANA and northern

Many northern and western tribal commanders feel that once the Americans leave, man-to-man the *Taliban* and the Pakistanis would be no match for them on Afghan soil. Their knowledge of the terrain and small raiding parties that melt in the local population give them an edge over fighters coming from across the border.

leaders, being free agents once again, may jointly go into a no holds barred fight that may not be confined to Afghanistan. They could train irregulars to pay the Pakistan military back in its own terms by carrying the fight deep into areas of Pakistan with the same terror and improvised explosive device insertion tactics that the *Taliban* have been using in Afghanistan. Many northern and western tribal commanders feel that once the Americans leave, man-to-man the

Taliban and the Pakistanis would be no match for them on Afghan soil. Their knowledge of the terrain and small raiding parties that melt in the local population give them an edge over fighters coming from across the border. If the Pakistani Army is not restrained by the civilian government, the dismantling of Pakistan might begin once the Americans leave. Talk of an end game in Afghanistan is not only premature, it is based on reasoning that harks back to the past. The real game for the future of Afghanistan and Pakistan will begin once the bulk of US forces is gone. ❖