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US, Russia, NATO and the Future of Afghanistan: Taliban Resurgence and the Geopolitics of Oil

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An impression is being created that there is a "rift" between the United States and Britain regarding the reconciliation track involving the Taliban. The plain truth is that the US, Britain, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan are in this murky game together.

The essence of the game is to make the "war on terror" in Afghanistan more efficient and cost-effective. Surely, it is official American thinking that there has to be some form of reconciliation with the Taliban. US Defense Secretary Robert Gates admitted as much last week. He said, "There has to be *ultimately*, and I'll underscore ultimately, reconciliation as part of the political outcome to this [war]. That's ultimately the exit strategy for all of us." (Emphasis added)

When you repeat a word thrice in five seconds, it does register. Gates suggested he wasn't hinting at all about an "exit strategy". Indeed, at an informal meeting of the defense ministers of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) last week in Budapest, Hungary, the alliance visualized a long haul in Afghanistan.

Taliban reconciliation

Any reconciliation with the Taliban would essentially be in the nature of picking up the threads from October 2001 when the US invaded Afghanistan and toppled the Taliban regime.

Taliban leader Mullah Omar promised at the 11th hour in those fateful days from his hideout in Kandahar via Pakistani intermediaries - that, yes, he would verifiably sequester his movement from al-Qaeda and ask Osama bin Laden to leave Afghan soil, provided the US acceded to his longstanding request to accord recognition to his regime in Kabul rather than engage it selectively. The US administration ignored the cleric's offer and instead pressed ahead with the plan to launch a "war on terror".



Mullah Omar

What we may expect in the period ahead is a deal whereby the "good" Taliban profess disengagement from al-Qaeda, which the US and its allies will graciously accept, and, in turn, the "good" Taliban won't insist on the withdrawal of Western forces as a pre-condition. The Saudis will ably lubricate such a deal.

The sheer "unaffordability" of an open-ended war in Afghanistan will influence thinking in Washington if the crisis in the US economy deepens. But we are still some way from that threshold. The war should be "affordable" if the new head of US Central Command, General David Petraeus, can somehow make it more "efficient", which is what he did in Iraq. Presently, American politicians only speak about robustly conducting the war.

They are nowhere near framing the fundamental issue: How central is the Afghan war to the global struggle against terrorism? The answer is crystal clear. Afghanistan has very little to do with the basic national interests of the United States. Political violence in Afghanistan is primarily rooted in local issues, and "warlordism" is an ancient trait. That is to say, the Taliban can be made part of the solution.

Ultimately, the objectives of nation-building and legitimate governance in an environment of overall security that allows economic activities and development can only be realized by accommodating native priorities and interests. Washington has been far too prescriptive, creating a US-style presidential system in Kabul and then controlling it.

But such a regime will never command respect among Afghans. Deploying more NATO troops or creating an Afghan army is not the answer. The international community has prudently chosen not to challenge the legitimacy of the Hamid Karzai regime, but there is a crisis of leadership. Inter-Afghan dialogue is urgently needed. The Afghans must be allowed to regenerate their traditional methods of contestation of power in their cultural context and to negotiate their cohabitation in their tribal context.

Again, the US has been proven wrong in believing that imperialism could trump nationalism. On the contrary, prolonged foreign occupation has triggered a backlash. The war should never have escalated beyond what it ought to have been - a low-intensity fratricidal strife, which has been a recurring feature of Afghan history. In other words, a solution to the conflict has to be primarily inter-Afghan, leading to a broad-based government free of foreign influence, where the international community can be a facilitator and guarantor.

Russia lashes out

But what clouds judgment is the geopolitics of the war. The war provided a context for the establishment of a US military presence in Central Asia; NATO's first-ever "out of area" operation; a turf which overlooks the two South Asian nuclear weapon states of India and Pakistan, Iran and China's restive Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region; a useful toehold on a potential transportation route for Caspian energy bypassing Russia and Iran, etc. The situation around Iran; the US's "Great Central Asia" policy and containment strategy towards Russia; NATO's expansion - these have become added factors. Surely, geopolitical considerations lie embedded even within the current attempt to revive the Saudi mediatory role.

The interplay of these various geopolitical factors has made the war opaque. Major regional powers - Russia, Iran and India - do not see the US or NATO contemplating a pullout from Afghanistan in the foreseeable future. Tehran has been alleging that the US strategy in Afghanistan is essentially to perpetuate its military presence.

As a result, Russian statements regarding the US role in Afghanistan have become highly critical. Moscow seems to have assessed that the US-led war is getting nowhere and blame-game had begun. More important, Russia has begun to pinpoint the US's "unilateralism" in Afghanistan.

In a major speech recently regarding European security at the World Policy Conference in Evian, France, President Dmitry Medvedev made a pointed reference, saying, "After the overthrow of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, the United States started a chapter of unilateral actions ..." He was making a point that the "United States' desire to consolidate its global role" is unrealizable in a multipolar world.

For the first time in the seven years of the war, the Russian foreign minister utilized the annual United Nations General Assembly forum to launch a broadside against the US, on September 27. Sergei Lavrov said:

More and more questions are being raised as to what is going on in Afghanistan. First and foremost, what is the acceptable price for losses among civilians in the ongoing anti-terrorist operation? Who decides on criteria for determining the proportionality of the use of force?



Lavrov at the UN

These and other factors give reasons to believe that the anti-terrorism coalition is in the face of crisis. Looking at the core of the problem, it seems that this coalition lacks collective arrangements - ie equality among all its members in decision-making on the strategy and, especially, operational tactics. It so happens that in order to control a totally new situation as it evolved after 9/11, instead of the required genuine cooperative effort, including a joint analysis and coordination of practical steps, the mechanisms designed for a unipolar world started to be used, where all decisions were to be taken in a single center while the rest were merely to follow. The solidarity of the international community fostered on the wave of struggle against terrorism turned out to be somehow "privatized".

These unusually sharp words underline the dissipation of the regional consensus over the war. Later, on September 28, at a press conference in the UN headquarters, Lavrov alleged that in a spirit of "prejudiced bias", the US was blocking the Moscow-led Collective Security Treaty Organization from helping to stabilize Afghanistan.

He also implied that the US vainly tried to block any reference to countering drug trafficking in the latest UN Security Council resolution on Afghanistan so as to deny Russia a role. He said, "Not quite full consideration is given to the assessments and the analyses of all members of the world community when making very important decisions which later tell on the situation of all."

A spat has since erupted over a UN-NATO cooperation agreement relating to the Afghan war allegedly signed "secretly" by a pliant secretary general, Ban Ki-moon, and his NATO counterpart, Jaap de Hoop Scheffer, on September 23 in New York. Russia has threatened to raise the matter in the UN Security Council. To quote Lavrov, "We [Russia] asked both [the UN and NATO] secretariats what this could mean and we are waiting for a reply, but we warned the UN leadership in the strictest fashion that things of this kind must be done without keeping secrets from member states and on the basis of powers and authority held by the secretariats."

Russian envoy to NATO Dmitry Rogozin said on Wednesday that Moscow would consider the Ban-Scheffer agreement "illegitimate", and as merely reflecting Ban's "personal opinion". As can be expected, Ban is keeping mum, while Scheffer contested the Russian allegation. Indeed, cracks are appearing in the US-Russia understanding over the anti-terrorism campaign in Afghanistan. A turf war is ensuing - Washington is determined to exclude Russia from Afghanistan and Moscow insisting on its legitimate role.



Moon and Scheffer

Iranian posturing

Similarly, Tehran also has raised the ante on Afghanistan. After having supported the US intervention in Afghanistan in 2001, in the recent period several statements highly critical of the US-led war in Afghanistan have appeared, attributed to the Iranian leadership. The latest high-profile statement was the criticism by the chairman of the Expediency Council, Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, at a meeting with the visiting former UN secretary general Kofi Annan, where he lamented that the "occupiers" who created "insecurity" in Afghanistan and Pakistan were now "unable to rein it in".

More ominously, Tehran has invited former Afghan president Burhanuddin Rabbani, who led the anti-Taliban coalition (Northern Alliance) in the 1990s to visit Iran. Receiving him in Tehran on

Sunday, the speaker of the Iranian parliament, (Majlis) Ali Larijani, told Rabbani, "The situation in Afghanistan is sorrowful and regrettable." He said the presence of foreign forces is creating "insecurity" in the loss of innocent lives and is causing rampant drug-trafficking.

In another statement in the Majlis two days earlier, Larijani condemned the US attacks on the Pakistani tribal areas in Waziristan. This was the first time an Iranian leader specifically took exception to the US military operations inside Pakistani territory. He said Iran was concerned about the extent of the devastation and the death toll in Waziristan and that the US had exceeded the limits of the Geneva Convention in fighting terrorism. "Every single day, civilians are falling victim to the US-led fight against terrorism," he said, adding the US was "destroying" Waziristan under the "pretext of fighting terrorism".

Most significantly, Tehran has broken its silence on the US-British-Saudi efforts to negotiate reconciliation with the Taliban. This has come, curiously enough, in the form of a statement by the powerful chairman of the Majlis National Security and Foreign Policy Commission, Alaeddin Broujerdi. Long-time observers of the Afghan scene would recognize Broujerdi as the principal designer and architect of the Northern Alliance and a key strategist of the anti-Taliban resistance in the 1996-98 period.

Conceivably, Tehran has dropped a meaningful hint by fielding Broujerdi to speak on the Western efforts to reconcile with the Taliban. Broujerdi firmly repudiated

the recent US propaganda that Tehran was mellowing toward the Taliban. Talking to a visiting French parliamentary delegation led by Socialist leader Jean-Louis Bianco on Sunday, Broujerdi underlined Tehran's continued opposition to the Taliban. He sharply criticized the European countries for adopting a conciliatory attitude towards the Taliban. He counseled them that instead they ought to extend unequivocal support to the "popular government" in Kabul led by Karzai.



Broujerdi pointed out that the West's attitude and approach toward the Taliban, which is an extremist group, will "damage regional stability and security". He said the root problem is the continued presence of foreign forces and a settlement will be possible only with their withdrawal.

Broujerdi may have signaled that Iran will challenge and counter any Western attempt to invite the Saudis to return to the Afghan chessboard and to co-opt the Taliban so as to perpetuate the US and NATO military presence. We may deduce that the scheduling of Rabbani's visit to Tehran is intended to signal that Iran still has reserves of influence with the Northern Alliance groups, despite the US estimation that these anti-Taliban groups have been scattered or bought over by Western intelligence.

Rabbani seems to have risen to the occasion. He also lent his voice condemning the continued presence of foreign forces on Afghan soil. "At first, they [Western forces] entered Afghanistan with the slogan that they would establish security and fight terrorism and drugs, but now Afghans are witnessing an escalation of terrorism and an increased production of narcotics," the inscrutable mujahideen leader told Larijani.

What was perplexing was Rabbani's remark, "The only solution to the Afghan crisis lies in the creation of unity among all national and jihadi [read mujahideen] forces in the country and the establishment of national reconciliation among all tribes without ethnic, tribal and religious prejudice." This was also the proclaimed political platform of the Northern Alliance. To be sure, Iran will oppose any ploy by US and British intelligence to resurrect the paradigm of the 1990s to put the Taliban in power so as to "pacify" Afghanistan and to create a modicum of stability necessary for the development of transportation routes for Caspian energy.

At a time when the fabulous Kashagan oil fields in Kazakhstan are expected to come on stream in 2013, when Washington hopes to reverse the tide of Russia-Turkmenistan energy cooperation, when volatility in the southern Caucasus impedes the advancement of new trans-Caspian pipelines, then, Afghanistan bounces back as the most realistic and viable evacuation route for Caspian energy bypassing Russia and Iran - provided the ground situation could be stabilized and security provided which investors and oil companies would find reassuring.

Indian dilemma

Both Russia and Iran will be keenly watching how India, which was a soul mate in the late 1990s staunchly supporting the anti-Taliban alliance, reacts to the current US-British-Saudi move. Indian leaders never tired of underscoring that there was nothing called "good Taliban" and "bad Taliban". That was up until a year ago. However, there is bound to be uneasiness in both Moscow and Tehran as to where exactly Delhi stands at the present juncture in the geopolitics of the region.

One thing is clear: a US-sponsored oil/gas pipeline via Afghanistan suits India, though that may undercut Russia and Iran in the energy sweepstakes.

From all accounts, discussions were going on between the security establishments of India and the US for the past several months regarding an Indian military involvement in Afghanistan. Washington has been pressing for a major Indian role. A two-member Indian team, which visited Kabul in early September, claimed they were on a mission sponsored by the government to make an assessment of the layout for Indian military involvement. The team apparently held discussions with top American diplomats and military officials based in Kabul.

Evidently, Delhi was clueless regarding Saudi King Abdullah's secret mediation with the Taliban. This intelligence failure had to happen. Indian diplomats have been somewhat smug about the unprecedented influence they wielded with the Kabul regime, and as happens in heady times, they began blandly assuming the durability of the present Afghan setup.

They worked shoulder-to-shoulder with their US counterparts in Kabul and American thinking inevitably began coloring Delhi's perceptions. It seems the intellectual osmosis ultimately became one-sided. Under constant US encouragement, the inebriating idea of a major military role in Afghanistan and playing the "great game" crept into the Indian calculus. Delhi seems to have incrementally lost touch with the Afghan bazaar and ground realities.

The US-British-Saudi plan to accommodate the Taliban in the power structure in Kabul creates a dilemma for Indian policymakers. To do an about-turn and begin to distinguish "good" Taliban is ridiculous. It will be seen as kow-towing to the US and will be difficult to rationalize. The antipathy towards the Taliban runs deep in the Indian mindset, since no matter the actual character of the Taliban's "Islamism", a threat perception gained ground in Indian opinion regarding "Islamic terror" from Afghanistan. The Indian establishment unwittingly contributed to this by harping on the ubiquitous "foreign hand" in terrorist activities in India. A rollback of the thesis will take time.

Furthermore, India views that the Taliban as an instrument of policy for Pakistani intelligence and as detrimental to Indian regional security interests. All in all,

Delhi will feel greatly relieved if the US abandons its plan to co-opt the "good" Taliban.

In the above scenario, both Tehran and Moscow will be looking forward to foreign minister-level consultations with Delhi in the coming weeks. Indian Foreign Minister Pranab Mukherjee is scheduled to visit Tehran in early November. Again, in November, in the run-up to the year-end visit by President Dmitry Medvedev to India, Lavrov and Prime Minister Vladimir Putin will have consultations in Delhi.

The geopolitical reality, however, is that all three countries have transformed in recent years and their foreign policy priorities and orientations have also changed. They relate today to US hegemony in Afghanistan from dissimilar perspectives of national interests.

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