

NATO's Commitment to Afghan War: Is It Wearing Thin?

by Ramtanu Maitra

Having inherited two “unwinnable” wars from Donald Rumsfeld, the new U.S. Secretary of Defense, Robert Gates, recently took a short trip to Afghanistan, en route to Iraq, to convey President Bush’s commitment to the Afghan war. What he found instead was a group of NATO commanders who do not want to lay down their lives in a war fought on behalf of the Bush Administration. These commanders complained bitterly about the duplicitous role of U.S. ally Pakistan—Afghanistan’s neighbor and the country that was honored by the Bush Administration in 2004 as the Major Non-NATO Ally.

For months, commanders from Britain, the United States, Denmark, Canada, and the Netherlands have been complaining that Pakistan’s President Pervez Musharraf is not doing enough to curb the Taliban insurgents. “It is time for an ‘either you are with us or against us,’ delivered bluntly to Musharraf at the highest political level,” one NATO commander told the London *Daily Telegraph* last October. “Our boys in southern Afghanistan are hurting because of what is coming out of Quetta,” the Taliban headquarters, the NATO commander added.

Observers point out that the worst fears of Afghanistan’s Karzai government and the NATO commanders at this point, are that the Taliban, with the active support of the Pakistani ISI (military intelligence) and Pakistani authorities, might launch bigger and fiercer attacks in the Spring.

On Jan. 24, after Secretary Gates’s meeting with the commanders in Kabul, the U.S. Defense Department decided to extend the combat tour of 3,200 soldiers from a 10th Mountain Division brigade in Afghanistan by four months, in hopes of quelling the predicted Spring violence. On the same day, the White House completed a review of the U.S. policy on Afghanistan and decided to ask the Congress for

\$7 to \$8 billion in new funds for security, reconstruction, and other projects, as part of the upcoming budget package, officials said.

A Quiet ‘Surge’

It is evident that Gates does not have many weapons left in his arsenal to “win” this war, either. He was aware of NATO’s ongoing difficulties with Pakistan’s backing of the Taliban, and there is very little Washington can do but to appeal to President Musharraf from time to time, urging him to abandon the sheltering of the Taliban inside Pakistan. Although Secretary Gates agreed to add more U.S. troops to the Afghan cauldron, he got no assurance in return from the NATO countries that they would also put more troops on the ground there.

In Afghanistan today, NATO commands 32,000 troops, of which 12,000 are U.S. troops. In addition, another 12,000 U.S. troops are in Afghanistan under U.S. command. It is not clear how many U.S. troops will be added. But, it is evident that the NATO countries are not interested in sending more. NATO’s top general last year called for another 2,000 to 2,500 more troops to go to Afghanistan; but NATO members did not jump to fill the request, and, as one Pakistani analyst pointed out recently, there is reluctance on the part of some nations to send troops to join the fight in the South, where British, Dutch, and Canadian forces have confronted the revived Taliban insurgency.

Another observer noted, that while the European Union does not have a distinct foreign policy in the case of Afghanistan, it is projecting such a policy through NATO and is guided by the United States. So, even if France and Germany dug in their heels when it came to invading Iraq, they claim to remain “committed” to the Afghanistan operation.

A Vacillating NATO

If the NATO countries are really committed to the Afghan operation, why do they not want to commit their troops? As a military alliance, NATO has 2.4 million men under arms, counting the armies of the member-states, but there is hesitation and fear on the part of the NATO governments when they are asked to consider requests for an extra 2,000 soldiers, and vital equipment such as helicopters, to make up a reserve for the Afghan mission.

Unlike NATO, the Bush Administration has not shown reluctance to remain engaged in Afghanistan. James Dobbins, a Rand Corporation analyst and former U.S. special envoy for Afghanistan, said the Bush Administration takes “the renewed challenge by the Taliban seriously” and it has been searching for “a more effective, more robust response.”

At the same time, Anthony Cordesman of the Washington, D.C.-based Center for Strategic and International Studies, writing for the *Financial Times* on Jan. 22, argued that the total force in Afghanistan is awfully small compared to 162,000 operating in Iraq. He pointed out that Afghanistan “has a population of more than 31 million, compared with some 27 million in Iraq, its territory is 50% larger and its transportation and communications infrastructure is far more primitive.” The enemy in Iraq has no major sanctuary outside the country; al-Qaeda, the Taliban, the Haqqani Network, and Hezb-e Islami Gulbuddin (Hekmatyar) all use sanctuaries in Waziristan in western Pakistan,” Cordesman said.

Moreover, Cordesman observed that only U.S., Canadian, British, Danish, Estonian, and Dutch forces are really in the fight. Important NATO partners such as France, Germany, Spain, Turkey, and Italy do not provide troops, except for French special forces.

In southern Afghanistan, where the insurgency led by the Pushtuns has made the entire southern and southeastern Afghanistan extremely dangerous, British troops are wholly ineffective. British Army commanders have said that the fighting in the south is the toughest the British Army has faced since the Korean War in the 1950s.

As a result, the main Pushtun city of Kandahar has been virtually lost to the Taliban, and the same can be said about the two southern provinces of Kandahar and Helmand. Cordesman said the International Security Assistance Forces, the name under which NATO functions in Afghanistan, indicated in a recent report that it needs six more battalions, and a rapid expansion of military trainers for the Afghan National Army and the Afghan National Police.

No Easy Recipe for Stability

It is likely that, given the fresh troops, and the money, the United States and the NATO forces will be able to prevent an insurgency “victory” in the Spring. It is said many times over, and it is true, that neither in Afghanistan, nor in Iraq, have the U.S. troops ever lost a battle. But the nature of the warfare in Afghanistan, or Iraq, does not end

with winning the battles only.

What, then, would stabilize Afghanistan and allow the United States to claim a victory? Gen. James Jones, who until recently was the NATO Commander, told Jim Lehrer of the Public Broadcasting System’s “Newshour,” that the objective of adding more troops is to stabilize a very important region in the south and in the east, where most of the fighting takes place. He claimed that while northern and western Afghanistan have no insurgency problems, the insurgents are centered in the south and east.

The real critical need in Afghanistan, Jones said, is reconstruction and development across four or five main areas. That would include removal of the “influence of narcotics on the culture, on the economy, and the economic support that it gives to the insurgency.”

General Jones identified the number two requirement as judicial reform. The number three requirement would be recruiting more police. “Number four is getting the Hamid Karzai government to be more visible inside of its own boundaries, to make sure that people understand that what they voted for two years ago is, in fact, a work in progress and . . . it’s coming in ways that will materially change their lives,” Jones said.

The other requirement to stabilize Afghanistan, Jones said, is to get Afghanistan and Pakistan to work together to solve the border problem.

There is little doubt that Jones has his heart in the right place. But, the Afghan insurgency will continue as long the foreign troops stay on Afghan soil. As long the foreign troops continue to roam the hills and plains of Afghanistan to maintain law and order, large numbers of Afghans will unify and attack the foreign troops. On the other hand, if the United States, and NATO leave the scene, putting in place a government in Kabul which represents a broad spectrum of Afghan society, and carries out economic development and opium eradication work seriously, stability will come to Afghanistan within a decade or so. But the process must also include contributions from, and participation of, Afghanistan’s neighbors, such as Iran, Pakistan, and the newly founded Central Asian nations.

As long as the armed-to-their-teeth U.S. and NATO occupying forces remain visible in Afghanistan, General Jones’ requirements to stabilize Afghanistan are absurd, and to a large extent show a clear lack of understanding of the internal dynamics that makes Afghanistan so difficult for the foreign nations to occupy and control.

To begin with, northern Afghanistan consists mostly of Afghans of Tajik and Uzbek ethnic descent. They are a minority in this 31 million-strong nation and historically have been at odds with the majority Pushtuns who live in the south and east. Most of the Taliban, if not all, came from the Pushtun majority and their takeover was not simply done by a group of Islamic zealots, but by the majority ethnic group.

On the other hand, western Afghanistan is populated by

the Hazaras. Not only are the Hazaras Shias—as opposed to the rest of Afghans, who are Sunnis—but many of them are part-Mongol. They live on the border of Iran and have developed close relations with Iran over millennia. Herat province, the center of Hazara power in Afghanistan, is much more prosperous today because of the Iranian contribution and efforts to make that area stable. It is no secret that long before the United States and the NATO countries expressed their concerns about the Taliban movement, which took over almost 95% of Afghanistan in 1995 (with the help of the Pakistani military), Iran had made clear its intense dislike of these Sunni zealots.

In addition, it is widely known that prior to, and during the Taliban reign in Afghanistan, there were mass killings of Pushtuns by the Uzbeks, and slaughtering of Hazaras by the Pushtun-Talibans.

Is NATO Pakistan's Target?

It is also not clear how, under prevailing circumstances, General Jones, or Washington, could bring together Kabul and Islamabad to cooperate in eliminating the Pushtun-led Taliban insurgency. The state of permanent denial that rules the roost in Washington refuses to look at the logic of things as they are. For instance, Pakistan never made it a secret that it would like to have Afghanistan within its sphere of influence. The Pakistani military thinks it needs the nation as its “strategic depth,” because of its fear of the growing Indian military and nuclear weapons power.

Second, to support the Pushtuns is sort of a “lifesaver” for Pakistan. Pushtun tribes are split between Pakistan and Afghanistan, divided by the Durand Line—a line in the sand that was drawn by the British colonials in 1893. No Pushtun has accepted this imaginary line as the international border separating Afghanistan from Pakistan. If Pakistan chooses to adopt a policy which could antagonize the Pushtun majority of Afghanistan, the Durand Line may turn out to be a permanent line of skirmish.

Third, since a large number of Pushtuns live in Pakistan and are Pakistani citizens, there is a rapport between the Pushtuns and the Punjabis, who dominate Pakistan's military and wield Pakistan's economic and political power. Afghans of Tajik and Uzbek origin have links closer to the Central Asians. They speak different languages and have distinct customs. They are also considered as closer to Iranians, or Turks, or even the Russians. Neither Pakistan, nor Britain,

nor the United States would like such forces to gain full-fledged control over Afghanistan. Hence, Pushtuns, in the form of the Taliban or otherwise, remain the only safe bet for Pakistan.

Finally, what exactly is the thinking in Pakistan about the advancement of NATO into Asia? NATO military commanders and the West have been airing their own misgivings about Pakistan's intent. They suspect double-speak and accuse the Musharraf government of pursuing a policy of running with the hare and hunting with the hound, as one Pakistani analyst put it. But little has been said about likely genuine Pakistani concern which lead them to play that role.

According to the International Crisis Group's latest report, the Pakistan government's ambivalent approach is not only destabilizing Afghanistan but also the United States and NATO. Chris Patten, a former European Union commissioner for external relations, has gone further. Writing recently in the *Wall Street Journal* he said: “Pakistan's primary export to Afghanistan today is instability. If we are really going to get to the core of Afghanistan's instability, we must tackle Pakistan.”

Come what may, neither Pakistan, nor the Taliban, would roll over and concede to the foreign occupiers in Afghanistan. Taliban spokesman Abdul Hai Mutmaen said they will be setting up jihad schools across Afghanistan to counter the propaganda of the West and the U.S.- and NATO-backed Karzai government. If they succeed in setting up such schools, he would do so with the help of Pakistani military and the ISI (Pakistani intelligence service).

“The aims are to reopen schools so children who are deprived can benefit and secondly, to counter the propaganda of the West and its puppets against Islam, jihad and the Taliban. Students will be taught subjects that are in line with Islamic teaching and jihad,” the *Daily Times* of Lahore quoted him as saying on the phone, from an undisclosed location.

Deeply worried, NATO is now mapping the entire Taliban support structure in Balochistan, from the Pakistani ISI-run training camps near Quetta, the capital of Balochistan, to huge ammunition dumps, the arrival points for Taliban's new weapons and meeting places of the shura, or leadership council, in Quetta. The shura is headed by Mullah Mohammed Omar, the Taliban supreme leader since its creation a dozen years ago.

NATO and Afghan officers say two training camps for the Taliban are located just outside Quetta, while the group is using hundreds of madrassahs, where the fighters are housed and fired up ideologically before being sent to the front.

Despite the threats emerging everyday, NATO countries are wholly unwilling to put more troops on the ground. NATO's former secretary-general, Lord Peter Carrington, said recently that the conflict in Afghanistan, the alliance's first mission outside of Europe, could be the “death knell” for the alliance, largely because so many member countries have refused to send troops to the most dangerous areas.

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