



Issue Brief

Template for Afghan Settlement

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The communiqué issued during the London conference on Afghanistan on 28 January 2010, attended by 66 countries and several international organizations, envisages that the Afghan security forces shall be able to take over the security burden increasingly. In the next five years, they are expected to take over complete responsibility. Meanwhile, the IMF and World Bank announced US\$ 1.6 billion debt relief to Afghanistan. Significantly, financial support has been offered for the ‘reconciliation’ policy with the so-called “good” Taliban.ⁱ

There is a growing desire among the Western countries, including the US, to seek a face-saving agreement with the Taliban insurgents that may facilitate an early exit from the Afghan quagmire. In December 2009, President Obama announced increase of 30,000 US troops in Afghanistan. Simultaneously, he set the time line for the withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan by July 2011. The US strategy can be best described as ‘surge, negotiate peace deal from a position of relative strength and exit’.

In principle, the validity of the ‘reconciliation’ policy in the war-torn multi-ethnic state of Afghanistan appears to be sound. However, in reality there is a need for considerable change of heart and policy thrust on the part of the Taliban if they have to become a part of any stable power-sharing arrangement in Afghanistan. Taliban’s acts of burning girls’ schools, wanton killing of journalists and the widely-publicized video of flogging of a young hapless girl during their recent takeover of the Swat valleyⁱⁱ in Pakistan, do not inspire confidence.

Indian Foreign Minister Mr. S.M. Krishna, who attended the London Conference, has said that India is prepared to give a try to ‘reconciliation efforts’ with the Taliban if the Taliban meet three conditions, viz., “acceptance of the Afghan constitution, severing connection with Al Qaeda and other terrorist groups and renunciation of violence.” He added that it is on this basis that the Taliban can be “accepted in the mainstream of Afghan politics and society,” and India “could do business” with themⁱⁱⁱ

Majority of the Taliban belong to the Pashtun tribes, who have traditionally been the ruling ethnic group in Afghanistan. Pashtun tribes live on both sides of the Afghan-Pakistan border. It would be incorrect to assume that all the Pashtuns support extremist ideology of the Taliban. In fact, during India’s freedom struggle, Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan, the highly respected Pashtun leader, set a glorious example by organizing non-violent anti-imperialist struggle in the Pashtun areas. He was popularly known as “Frontier Gandhi.” However, the track record of the current Taliban presents a totally different picture.

Track Record of Taliban 1994-2001

In the mid-1990s, Sharia law was imposed in areas that came under the Taliban control in its harshest interpretation than anywhere else in the Muslim world. Girls’ schools and educational institutions were shut down; women were forced to wear head-to-toe veils and banned from working outside their homes. It hurt a large number of war widows, who are the sole breadwinners of their respective families.

Further, the Taliban imposed a harsh and inhumane medieval justice system in the form of summary trials, public executions, amputation of limbs and stoning to death.

The Pashtun-dominated Taliban has consistently refused to share power with other ethnic groups. Persian-speaking Herat fell to Taliban in September 1995. It was treated like “an occupied city” with utter insensitivity to local sentiments.^{iv} In 1997-1998, ethnic divisions under the Taliban further aggravated leading to brutal ethnic massacres in Mazar-e-Sharif. The flourishing northern Afghan city of Mazar-e-Sharif was known for its plural and liberal character. Moreover, the Sunni Taliban resorted to systematic persecution and genocide of Shia Hazaras.

The Taliban showed scant regard for internationally accepted norms and social behaviour. Dr. Najibullah, former Afghan President and his brother were dragged out of

the UN premises in Kabul, were brutally tortured and killed, and their bodies were publicly hanged on a lamppost in Kabul flouting all international norms. The Taliban made it impossible for UN aid agencies and various NGOs to do relief work, while the terrorists and militant groups from all across the world --from Kashmir to Chechnya-- found support and shelter in Afghanistan.

The international community witnessed with horror and shock as the Taliban committed the barbaric act of destroying the two-thousand year old Buddha statues in Bamiyan. The giant rock statues were not only a civilizational heritage of Afghanistan, but of the entire mankind.

After the Taliban came to power, around sixty thousand Hindus and Sikhs who were living in Afghanistan for several generations, were forced to leave the country.

If initially there was some tacit support in the West for the Taliban in the hope that they would succeed in stabilizing the country, open transport routes to Central Asia and lay down gas pipeline from there to southern Asia bypassing Iran, this belief was replaced by growing abhorrence of their despicable human rights record and medieval criminal justice system.

There is little doubt that the valiant people of Afghanistan deserve a better and forward-looking dispensation than the one imposed by the Taliban.

Close Nexus between ISI and the Taliban

A close nexus between the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) of Pakistan and the Afghan *mujaheddin* and the Taliban fighters has been in existence for a long time. Pakistan's ruling establishment, dominated by military and the ISI, has been persistently trying to use first the Afghan *mujaheddin* and then the Taliban as useful tools to achieve larger geo-strategic objective of acquiring strategic depth vis-à-vis India by having a 'compliant surrogate' regime in Afghanistan. As early as July 1988, in an interview to Selig Harrison, a noted American scholar, General Zia ul Haq had revealed his ambition of establishing a pan-Islamic dispensation in Afghanistan and Central Asia. He observed, "We have earned the right to have a very friendly regime there (in Afghanistan). We took the risks as a frontline state, and we won't permit it to be like it was before, with Indian and Soviet influence there and claim on our territory. It will be a real Islamic state, part

of a Pan Islamic revival that will one day win over the Muslims in the Soviet Union. You will see.”^v

ISI officers closely worked with the Taliban in planning strategies to establish control over Afghanistan and Pakistan provided military and logistic support.^{vi} At every stage, the ISI officers and other Pakistani officials were invariably at hand to render necessary assistance. Thus, when Mazar-e-Sharif fell to Taliban in May 1997, Pakistani diplomats and ISI officers flew in the city to help Taliban negotiate with the local commanders.^{vii} Earlier in March 1996, Qazi Humayun, Pakistan’s Ambassador to Kabul and other government officials were present in Kandahar where a large gathering of mullahs and *ulemas* was held from which all foreigners were banned. At the gathering, Mullah Omar was declared ‘Amir-ul Momineen’ (Commander of the Faithful).^{viii}

From time to time, *madrassas* in Pakistan were shut down to enable thousands of Afghan and Pakistani students to join the ranks of the Taliban fighters in Afghanistan.^{ix}

Taliban removed from Power after 9/11; Pakistan Forced to Join War on Terror

The Taliban were defeated and removed from power in October 2001 by the US-led war on terror “Operation Enduring Freedom” following the 9/11 terror attacks on the US by Al Qaeda, based in Afghanistan. Under intense US pressure, Pakistan made a policy about-turn, severed ties with Taliban, and joined the US-led global war on terror. The remnants of Taliban and Al Qaeda took refuge in the tribal regions of Pakistan bordering on Afghanistan. President Gen. Musharraf (1999-August 2008), like an accomplished conjuror, promised support and seemingly projected himself as ‘indispensable’ for peace and security of the country and the region. The US accorded Pakistan the status of Major Non-NATO Ally in 2004, while Pakistan continued to maintain close ties with China.

Double Game Exposed

Amidst talks of international solidarity in the war against terror, a part of Pakistani security establishment under President Musharraf continued to maintain links with terrorist elements and aid their anti-India and destabilizing activities in Afghanistan. The ‘double game’ of Pakistan could not be hidden for long. It has been reported that US\$ 10 billion received in aid from the US for bolstering the anti-terrorist capabilities of

Pakistan, were misappropriated for other purposes and the ISI continued to maintain ties with Taliban militants.^x Vladimir Plastun, a noted Russian expert of Oriental Studies, for instance, remarked, “Pakistan cannot decide whether it wants to fight terrorism or encourage it as state policy.”^{xi}

Today Pakistan has a civilian dispensation. It is battling with Islamic militancy that it once spawned. However, it is clear that the entrenched vested interests in the country’s powerful military-bureaucratic establishment are only prepared to fight against the Pakistani Taliban in the Swat valley and South Waziristan as they are challenging the Pakistani state. Quetta-based Afghan Taliban leaders under Mullah Omar –known as ‘Quetta Shura’ -- are still being treated by Pakistani military and ISI as ‘strategic assets’ aimed at installing a pro-Pakistani regime in Kabul once the US/NATO forces withdraw from there. Pakistani army has made it amply clear that it is in no hurry to launch military action in Northern Waziristan, where most of the Afghan and Al Qaeda militants are known to be concentrated.

The Role of International Community

Afghanistan enjoys a unique geopolitical importance as a country located on the crossroads of Central Asia, South Asia and the Middle East. In the past three decades, it has suffered incessant bloodshed and devastation because other powers and neighbouring countries have tried to settle scores and make geopolitical gains at the expense of the divided people of Afghanistan.

The approach of various countries towards Afghanistan can be broadly put into two categories:

(a) Some countries such as Pakistan, desire to arrogate to themselves the right to decide the future of Afghanistan with the aim of furthering their own narrow geopolitical interests to the exclusion and detriment of others.

(b) The second approach is an inclusive approach, whereby the entire international community can join hands to promote peace, stability and speedy economic development of Afghanistan.

In October 1997, at the height of the civil war in Afghanistan between the Taliban and their opponents, the then UN Secretary General Kofi Annan set up a group at the UN

called “Six plus Two” with the objective of seeking a solution of the Afghan crisis. It included six neighbours of Afghanistan, viz., Iran, Pakistan, China, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan plus US and Russia. At that time, there was no widely recognized government in Kabul and the Taliban government was recognized only by Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and UAE.^{xii} Therefore, the ‘group of six’ did not have any official representative of Afghanistan. The primary objective was to impress on the neighbours to desist from aiding the Afghan belligerents. In the wake of Taliban gains, Pakistan-Iran rivalry in Afghanistan had become particularly acute. In August 1998, the situation further aggravated after the Taliban murdered 11 Iranian diplomats in Mazar-e-Sharif. The ‘Six plus Two’ mechanism could never work effectively. However, from the Pakistani perspective, ‘Six plus Two’ proved to be a convenient mechanism to keep India out. As a ‘near neighbour’ India has always been a major stakeholder in Afghan developments. With the exception of the period of the Taliban rule, New Delhi and Kabul have always enjoyed friendly ties. Moreover, developments in Afghanistan have always impacted on vital security interests of India. The Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir witnessed its worst period of terrorist violence when the Taliban were in control in neighbouring areas of Afghanistan. Following the regime change, Indo-Afghan relations have again warmed up. In April 2007, Afghanistan joined SAARC (South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation) as its eighth member. This underscores the fact that the destiny of Afghanistan is linked with the broader South Asian region. Geographically, Afghanistan is a bridge between South Asia and Central Asia.

The growth in insurgency in past few years beginning with 2006, has again led to search for solutions. An attempt was made in 2008 to revive the defunct ‘Six plus Two’ framework as ‘Six plus Three’ by including NATO. At a high profile international conference at Tashkent on April 30-May 2, 2008, the ‘Six plus Three’ proposal came under strong criticism from Afghan delegation, as the proposed mechanism did not include the representative of Afghan government itself.

The prospects of the withdrawal of international forces from Afghanistan following some ‘deal’ with the Taliban expected to be reached with the help of Pakistan, have prompted Islamabad to go into diplomatic overdrive to marginalize India and further its short-sighted geo-strategic designs. Pakistan has tried to mobilize the defunct ‘Six plus

Two' formula again.^{xiii} It succeeded in motivating Turkey, an OIC and ECO member, to hold a conference of Afghanistan's neighbours plus Russia, US and leading NATO countries at Istanbul two days ahead of the London conference with a view to influencing the course of the London conference. India was not invited to Istanbul conference.

India's Contribution for Afghan Reconstruction

Following the defeat of the Taliban, UN-sponsored broad-based Conference on Afghanistan at Bonn in November-December 2001 pledged international support for the reconstruction of Afghanistan on the condition that the new Afghan leaders respect human rights and international humanitarian law and promote equality for women in Afghan society. India whole-heartedly shared the tasks and objectives set by the Bonn Conference and emerged as a major donor country for building infrastructure projects for socio-economic development of Afghanistan. So far, India has spent more than \$1.3 billion in Afghanistan in building roads and highways, schools, hospitals, electric transmission lines, power stations, TV and telecommunication network. India has built the crucial Zaranj-Delaram road, which links Afghanistan to the Iranian port of Chabahar. It has assisted in putting together the public transport system of Afghanistan. It is also building Afghanistan's new Parliament building. India is also conducting a massive training and educational programme for young Afghan professionals and students. It is believed that India's model of pluralism, liberalism and promoting 'unity in diversity' can be of relevance to the multi-ethnic and multi-lingual people of Afghanistan. Significantly, India's initiatives in Afghanistan have received popular support among the people. Seventy per cent of the people of Afghanistan have a positive view of India's role in Afghanistan.^{xiv}

Lasting peace in Afghanistan requires that interests of the peoples of Afghanistan be safeguarded in an inclusive political settlement. Afghanistan should not once again become a play field of those forces that have in the past tried to achieve their geo-strategic ambitions at its expense to the exclusion of other international players.

India needs to play a proactive role in mobilizing wider international support for a positive and constructive solution to the Afghan crisis. Rise of religious extremism and militancy is a cause of concern not only for India, but also for all other states in the

region including Russia, China, Central Asian states and Iran as also for countries of the West.

India also needs to develop and nurture links and leverages with all the major ethnic groups inside Afghanistan -- both the Pashtuns and non-Pashtuns. Template for Afghan settlement should incorporate widely accepted principles, constructive and forward-looking policies and approaches that may contribute to peace, stability and prosperity of Afghanistan and the entire region.

Notes

ⁱ Taliban or the students of Islamic seminaries or *madrassas*, rose to power in Afghanistan after taking over Kandahar in November 1994 on the promise of bringing peace in the war-ravaged country and securing roads and highways from the clutches of numerous warlords, who controlled various parts of Afghanistan. By September 1996, the Taliban had captured Kabul. Now the term Taliban is broadly used for the insurgents fighting against the Afghan government and International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan.

ⁱⁱ The Taliban first established control over Swat valley region between October-end and beginning of November 2007. They tried to impose their version of Sharia law in the valley that included prevention of women's education, banning barbershops, music shops and opposing polio vaccine. Following several vicissitudes and policy flip-flops, it was only in May 2009 that Pakistani army launched decisive military operation to establish control over the region.

ⁱⁱⁱ *The Times of India*, January 30, 2010.

^{iv} Ahmed Rashid, *Taliban: Islam, Oil and the New Great Game in Central Asia* (London; I.B. Tauris Publishers, 2001 edition), p. 39.

^v Selig Harrison's article in the *Washington Post*, compiled in *Afghanistan in the Mirror of the World Press* (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Afghanistan, Kabul 1989), p. 90.

^{vi} Ahmed Rashid, no. 4, *passim*, op.cit.

^{vii} *Ibid.* p. 58.

^{viii} *Ibid.* p. 42.

^{ix} *Ibid.* p. 59.

^x Jane Perlez, "Musharraf's failed double game led to his undoing," *International Herald Tribune*, August 18, 2008; "Pakistan's Double Game," *The Washington Times*, September 21, 2008.

^{xi} Vladimir Plastun, "Central Asia in Search of Stability," *Central Asia and the Caucasus Journal of Social and Political Studies* available at http://www.ca-c.org/online/2008/journal_eng/cac-02/03.shtml.

^{xii} After the Taliban refused to part company with Osama bin Laden and Al Qaeda, even Saudi Arabia lost its enthusiasm for the Taliban.

^{xiii} <http://siyasipakistan.wordpress.com/2010/01/26/>; Also, ANI dispatch from Islamabad, January 26, 2010.

^{xiv} In an opinion poll, commissioned by BBC, ABC and German TV ARD on January 20, 2010, seventy-one per cent of Afghans rated India as the most favoured foreign country and endorsed India's role in the reconstruction of the country. India was followed by Germany (59 percent), the US (51 percent), Iran (50 percent) and Britain (39 percent). Pakistan was found to be the least popular country, with only two percent of Afghans viewing its role favourably, <http://arzepakistan.com/forum.php>, January 20, 2010.

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