

NATO and South Asian security: NATO Plants Itself In South Asia For The Long Haul

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Clearly, the U.S. will be in the driving seat in the Hindu Kush for the long-term. The billions of dollars the U.S. has been pumping in for upgrading Soviet-era military bases in Afghanistan and constructing new military bases now fall into perspective....Overarching these considerations comes the U.S. strategy visualising NATO as the provider of security to the Silk Road that transports the multi-trillion dollar mineral wealth in Central Asia to the world market via the port of Gwadar. The Afghan-Pakistan trade and transit agreement concluded last month was a historic milestone and was possible only because of Washington's sense of urgency. Without doubt, Pakistan is assured of a key role in the U.S. regional strategy. This will keep foreign money flowing into Pakistan's economy and the Pakistani military will willingly accelerate the partnership programmes with NATO, and even upgrade them.

From a seemingly reluctant arrival in Afghanistan seven years ago, NATO is deepening its presence and recasting its role and activities on a long-term basis.

The summit meeting of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation in Lisbon constituted a significant event for South Asia. The alliance is transforming itself into playing a global political-military role. "We are firmly committed to preserving its [NATO's] effectiveness as the globe's most successful political-military alliance." Its core task will be to defend Europe and ensure the collective security of its 28 members, while the Strategic Concept adopted at Lisbon envisages NATO's prerogative to mount expeditionary operations globally.

The document is explicit: "Where conflict prevention proves unsuccessful, NATO will be prepared and capable to manage ongoing hostilities. NATO has unique conflict-management capacities, including the unparalleled capability to deploy and sustain robust military forces in the field." The alliance pledged to strengthen and modernise its conventional forces, and develop the full range of military capabilities. It will remain a nuclear alliance while developing a missile defence capability. The Strategic Concept reaffirmed that NATO would forge partnerships globally and reconfirmed the commitment to expand membership to democratic states that meet the alliance's criteria.

As an emerging regional power, India needs to take note of NATO's transformation. Indian discourses blithely assumed that NATO would have no appetite for far-flung operations anymore and was desperately looking for an exit strategy in Afghanistan. But on the contrary, the NATO psyche comes out unscathed. Will NATO be prepared to subject itself to the collective will of the international community as represented in the United Nations or will Article 5 of its Charter be the overriding principle? India hopes to become a permanent member of the Security Council in a not-too-distant future. Historically speaking, India's

worldview opposed military blocs and alliances and placed primacy on the U.N. Charter and international law. Again, the world order needs to be factored in — NATO assertively proclaims its transatlantic moorings on a global plane while Europe's (western world) dominance in international politics is on the wane and the locus of power is rapidly shifting to Asia.

But what is of great import for South Asian security is that from a seemingly reluctant arrival in Afghanistan seven years ago in an "out-of-area" operation as part of the U.N.-mandated ISAF (International Security Assistance Force), with a limited mandate, NATO is suo motu stepping out of ISAF, deepening its presence and recasting its role and activities on a long-term basis. South Asian security will never be the same again. This has grave implications for Indian strategies as an emerging power in the Indian Ocean region.

At the Lisbon summit, NATO and Afghanistan signed a Declaration, the thrust of which is on affirming "their long-term partnership" and building "a robust, enduring partnership which complements the ISAF security mission and continues beyond it." It recognises Afghanistan as an "important NATO partner ... contributing to regional security" and, in turn, expects that country to provide the alliance with "necessary assistance to carry out its partnership activities" while recognising the "importance and relevance of broader regionally-owned cooperation, coordination and confidence-building between Afghan and its regional partners, as exemplified in the Istanbul Statement."

In short, NATO and Afghanistan will "strengthen their consultation on issues of strategic concern" and, to this end, develop "effective measures of cooperation" which would include "mechanisms for political and military dialogue ... a continuing NATO liaison in Afghanistan....NATO and Afghanistan will initiate discussion on a Status of Forces Agreement within the next three years. The Declaration also provides for the inclusion of "non-NATO nations" in the cooperation framework.

The Lisbon summit confirmed that the NATO military presence in Afghanistan will continue even beyond 2014, the timeline suggested by President Hamid Karzai for Kabul to be completely in charge of the security of the country.

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Even after 2014, NATO will maintain its counterterrorism capability in Afghanistan "until we have the confidence that the al-Qaeda is no longer operative and is no longer a threat." NATO may even undertake combat operations beyond 2014 if and when need arises. As Mr. Obama put it, by 2014 the "NATO footprint in Afghanistan will have been significantly reduced. But beyond that, it's hard to anticipate exactly what is going to be necessary ... I'll make that determination when I get there." Clearly, the U.S. will be in the driving seat in the Hindu Kush for the long-term. The billions of dollars the U.S. has been pumping in for upgrading Soviet-era military bases in Afghanistan and constructing new military bases now fall into perspective.

It almost seems that New Delhi has been quietly preparing for this moment, backtracking unobtrusively from its traditional stance of seeking a "neutral" Afghanistan.

Of course, the bottom line for the government is that the foreign policy should be optimally harmonised with U.S. regional strategies. But then, the geopolitics of the Afghan war cannot be equated with New Delhi's longing for permanent membership of the Security Council or viewed merely through the prism of U.S.-India "strategic partnership."

Nor can India as a responsible regional power fundamentally regard the NATO military presence in zero-sum terms — or in terms of U.S.-China rivalries. On balance, New Delhi's motivation seems to be tactical — a lingering hope that an open-ended NATO presence may sooner or later prompt the Obama administration to confront the Pakistani military on its policy of using Taliban militants to gain “strategic depth” and of conceiving terrorism as an instrument of state policy. However, this would be a short-sighted approach for two reasons: one, it wrongly assumes that the American and Pakistani objectives in Afghanistan are irreconcilable and, two, it overlooks that a great power invariably distinguishes between tactic and strategy.

The following elements reveal how, despite the prickly nature of their partnership, the U.S. and Pakistan are like Siamese twins: Both seek a peaceful Afghanistan but have divergent approaches to how to achieve it; both agree that durable peace is not possible without legitimising traditional Pashtun aspirations; the U.S. knows that Pakistani military leadership wields influence over the insurgents; it accepts that Pakistan's cooperation is vital not only for reaching a settlement but also ensuring that peace will be durable so that Afghanistan stabilises; Pakistan remains hesitant to give up its “strategic assets” lest Washington overlook its strategic needs; NATO operations will run into serious difficulty without the supply routes via NWFP and Baluchistan but then Pakistan receives billions of dollars in aid annually and it cannot afford to antagonise the U.S. either; the Pakistani military is averse to undertaking operations in North Waziristan but at the same time it tacitly provides basing facilities (and probably intelligence) for the U.S. drone operations in the tribal areas, besides permitting hundreds or thousands of American intelligence operatives to function all over the country; all in all, the U.S. has limits to its capacity to pressure Pakistan, which seamlessly leverages its “all-weather friendship” with China.

Quite clearly, Pakistan and the U.S. are under a strong compulsion to reconcile their divergent approaches and work toward an Afghan settlement. The main sticking point is the strategy currently pursued by U.S. commander David Petraeus, who hopes to degrade the insurgents so that the Americans can eventually talk with the Taliban leadership from a position of strength. Indian pundits shouldn't exaggerate the gravity of this discord.

Overarching these considerations comes the U.S. strategy visualising NATO as the provider of security to the Silk Road that transports the multi-trillion dollar mineral wealth in Central Asia to the world market via the port of Gwadar. The Afghan-Pakistan trade and transit agreement concluded last month was a historic milestone and was possible only because of Washington's sense of urgency. Without doubt, Pakistan is assured of a key role in the U.S. regional strategy. This will keep foreign money flowing into Pakistan's economy and the Pakistani military will willingly accelerate the partnership programmes with NATO, and even upgrade them.

India's ability to tap into the Silk Road depends on the settlement of differences with Pakistan which would, hopefully, encourage the generals in Rawalpindi to jettison their “India-centric” mindset. Being NATO member- countries alone didn't really help Turkey and Greece through four decades and ultimately it was the sustained bilateral initiative by Ankara, keeping in view the imperative of accession talks with the European Union, that improved the climate of relations with Athens.

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