

The Anglo-American Endgame for Afghanistan

Neutral Afghanistan serves regional stability

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The Anglo-American project to craft an Afghan endgame that ensures long-term western military presence in the South and Central Asian region has entered a critical phase. The United States and North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) now acknowledge that a complete withdrawal from the region by 2014 is not in the cards. Several stages of diplomatic and political deception concealed this “hidden agenda.” Regional powers — Pakistan and India, in particular — are sadder and wiser today.

Looking back, the military stalemate in Afghanistan provided a persuasive argument for the West to justify the opening of a political track. The U.S. and Britain literally shoved down the throat of regional countries at the London conference in January last year their idea of reconciliation with the Taliban. India was assured that what was being contemplated was mere “reintegration” — and not “reconciliation” — and was given a bit of tutoring in the subtle uses of the English language. Pakistan was in a triumphalist mood, having been assured privately that it would be the kingmaker in any peace process. Equally, Russia was basking in the sunshine of the newly-invented process of “reset” in relations with the U.S. Iran, which was consistently wise to the western game plan, boycotted the London conference. China, of course, kept its head below the parapet.

Following the London conference, which must stand out as a first-rate drama of diplomatic deception, the U.S. and Britain rightly proceeded to claim an “international mandate” for talking to the Taliban. With the help of Saudi Arabia, a series of secret meetings with the representatives of various insurgent groups commenced.

NATO aircraft provided transportation for Taliban participants in these meetings and according to Der Spiegel, Berlin got U.S. intelligence operatives and Taliban representatives

to meet face-to-face on German soil more than once. All the while, the Anglo-American deception continued and a thick layer of fog surrounded the entire process. Mark Sedwill, U.K.'s special representative on Af-Pak, during last week's visit to New Delhi, said with a delightfully airy vagueness that will be the envy of any diplomat: "There are channels of communication being explored... This outreach to the senior leaders is still in the very early stages. And we don't know how serious they are... It is Afghan-led but that doesn't mean that others are not involved. Others are involved. All initiatives are with Afghan consent and on their behalf."

Meanwhile, former Afghanistan President and head of the Afghan High Council for Peace, Burhanuddin Rabbani, revealed that his members have held preliminary talks with the main Taliban group led by Mullah Mohammad Omar and the so-called Quetta Shura and that the "multiple channels" are indeed "getting momentum." According to the Guardian, representatives of the Haqqani network visited Kabul "very recently." Simultaneously, the U.S. is spearheading a move in New York for the removal of the Taliban from the United Nations' list of terrorists so that they can travel and openly take part in talks. The idea has been floated that the Taliban be permitted to open "representative office" in a third country.

The U.S. is piloting a proposal to remove 20 Taliban figures from the U.N. list. Alongside, it is pushing for a range of changes to the U.N.'s so-called "1275 list," which comprises around 450 terrorists belonging to al-Qaeda and the Taliban. The U.S. wants to "separate" the Taliban from al-Qaeda and the justification being given is that the al-Qaeda and the Taliban belong to two "different fields of action" as unlike the al-Qaeda which is a global organisation, the Taliban is "Afghanistan-centric." The plain truth, however, is that the U.S. wants to hold out the tantalising prospect of lifting sanctions against select Taliban figures as a bargaining chip to get them to talk and cut deals directly with American negotiators. Unsurprisingly, having been caught unawares at the London conference, Russia, China and India are today on guard and view the U.S. moves at the U.N. Security Council with reserve.

The western propaganda has drummed up a grim scenario in Afghanistan, which provides the *raison d'être* of long-term western military bases. The visiting French Foreign Minister, Alain Juppe, told journalists in Washington last week that the U.S. is engaged in tripartite talks with the Taliban and Pakistan, that it wants the Taliban to be part of the solution but has had difficulty so far finding credible interlocutors on the Taliban side who are willing to talk peace and that talks are under way "as we speak." He said that despite the U.S.' surge a year ago, and notwithstanding claims of progress by U.S. and NATO generals commanding the troops, actual progress against the Taliban is inadequate. "The strategy doesn't succeed as well as we expected on the ground," he said. He went on to doubt the feasibility of the "transition" through 2014 that is being planned in July, since the Afghan army and police are ill-prepared to assume responsibility for security.

Regional opposition

The sum and substance of what Mr. Juppe said is that despite the efforts to engage the Taliban and notwithstanding the "transition" that is being planned, the insurgency will not end in the near future. What he left unsaid was that continued western troop presence beyond 2014, therefore, is a must.

To be sure, Washington is secretly negotiating a 'strategic partnership agreement' with the

Kabul government that provides for military bases on a long-term basis. Again, the U.S. is in denial but its doublespeak is increasingly getting exposed.

The regional powers oppose a long-term U.S.-NATO military presence but Washington counts on the Kabul government to deliver. The Kabul government is on the horns of a dilemma insofar as the American dollar holds its own attractions in the Hindu Kush but then, one has to be alive first to enjoy the good life and the bottom line is that Afghan people may not like the prospect of foreign military occupation and the regional powers are opposing it. In a fit of disgust, Pakistan reportedly advised the Kabul government to swap the American dollar for the Chinese yuan. The Afghan bazaar is agonising. Whereas the U.S. remains confident about the Afghan bazaari culture and estimates that the Afghan protagonists after some pretentious hard bargaining will ultimately settle for a deal that won't burn a hole in America's pocket.

Core issue

It is a sad state of affairs that a once-proud nation is being traded in the bazaar. The core issue for the U.S. is that the Taliban should mellow on its uncompromising opposition to the long-term western troop presence as quid pro quo for what passes for "reconciliation."

To this end, Washington needs to deal with the Taliban directly, on a one-to-one basis without Pakistani or Afghani intermediaries — despite the U.S.' proforma acknowledgement all through of Pakistan's key role as 'facilitator' and despite paying lip-service that reconciliation with the Taliban ought to be "Afghan-led."

This tussle lies at the core of the U.S.-Pakistan tensions, as Islamabad is credited with influence over the Quetta Shura. Pakistan's military leadership resents that contrary to earlier pledges, when the crunch time approached, the U.S. bypassed the Inter-Services Intelligence and the Central Intelligence Agency operatives began networking directly with various militant organisations. Through two months of sustained grilling of the U.S.'s ace intelligence operative Raymond Davis in a Lahore jail by the ISI, Pakistani military leadership got to know a lot about the reach of the CIA's penetration of Pakistan's body polity.

A huge challenge faces Indian policymakers also. Quite obviously, New Delhi views these developments with concern. The good part is that it has measured the "big picture" while being what Washington fondly calls the U.S.' "indispensable partner in the 21st century." Thus, New Delhi persists with its far-sighted dialogue approach toward Pakistan although it is deeply disappointed by Pakistan's lack of response on 26/11 investigations and on dismantling the terrorist infrastructure. New Delhi also takes care not to identify with the U.S.'s 'containment' strategy toward China.

Not much ingenuity is required to anticipate that India's interests will be severely damaged if this region becomes the arena of a "new cold war" stemming out the long-term NATO military presence in South and Central Asia. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh took the initiative to strengthen New Delhi's ties with Kabul while judiciously leaving it to the latter to set the parameters in deference to Pakistani sensitivities.

The Indian move to seek membership of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) promises to provide a much-needed forum for New Delhi to partake in regional processes where India gets to work with Russia, China and Pakistan. India's policymakers are doing extraordinarily well in navigating the country's passage through a rather dangerous

situation.

The Anglo-American enterprise capitalised on the absence of a regional initiative. The U.S.' diplomacy brilliantly succeeded in creating disruptions in Russia's and India's traditional ties with Iran to isolate Tehran, which is an influential player in Afghanistan, apart from tapping into the contradictions in India's relations with China and Pakistan. The U.S. selectively engaged Russia under the rubric of "reset." On the whole, however, the regional powers are today a wiser lot about the criticality of a neutral Afghanistan.

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