

STABILIZATION OF AFGHANISTAN: U.S.-NATO REGIONAL STRATEGY & THE ROLE OF SCO

Simbal Khan *

Limits of unilateralism and the re-emergence of regional dynamics

Eight years ago, the events of September 2001 crystallized the contours of the emerging post-Cold War world. The neo-conservative interpretations of the structure of the global system as a unipolar order were largely accepted as the dominant framework and the U.S. emerged as an unapologetic unilateral power. The war in Afghanistan underlined the power of the system level forces – U.S. and NATO – to penetrate and affect change, subordinating the autonomy of the regional security complexes.

However, after eight years of a seemingly un-winnable war and the growing likelihood of a dangerous expansion of the conflict engulfing other regional States, there is a renewed interest in the U.S. policymakers to understand the regional dynamics, and re-engage the regional States in stabilizing the increasingly chaotic Afghanistan.

The years 2006-2008 saw a fast deterioration of the security environment in Afghanistan. This sense of general alarm about the war in Afghanistan defined the presidential campaign during the U.S. elections. In March 2009, President Obama presented the draft of a new U.S. policy on Afghanistan and Pakistan which aimed to address this security slide with a spate of new strategies. One aspect of this new thinking was to address the increasing instability by addressing the regional dynamics and engaging the main regional actors.

Geopolitics of Afghanistan: The Regional Security Complexes

Geopolitically, Afghanistan straddles three critical regional security complexes – the Central Asian sub-system dominated by Russia, the South Asian security complex structured around India and Pakistan's intense security dynamics, and Southeast Asia, dominated by the great emerging global power, China. The U.S.-led Afghan war that deposed the Taliban government in 2001, has led to growing levels of military engagement by U.S. and NATO and this intervention in turn is countered by a number of non-State forces resisting domination and marginalization

* *The writer is Acting Director (Research) at the Institute of Strategic Studies, Islamabad.*

through unconventional strategies both military and economic. This conflation of the system level with the regional countries during the eight-year war in Afghanistan has had a profound impact on the security of regional States and also on their bilateral relations.

On the south-eastern borders of Afghanistan, the trans-border nature of the militant movements and terrorist networks has engulfed Pakistan in a vicious spiral of instability and insecurity. In the North, the Central Asian neighbours and Russia are threatened by an implosion of narcotics and organized criminal networks that are an endemic feature of such ungoverned spaces as those that straddle much of Afghanistan's porous borders.

The regional States have long insisted that they must be included in devising strategies for the stabilization of Afghanistan. However, the troop surge and the continued military engagement of U.S./NATO forces in Afghanistan are likely to provide for clearly delimited and moderated levels of regional engagement. The space for regional input exists as long as these interventions by regional States resonate with the larger objectives that have been outlined in the new U.S./NATO strategy for Afghanistan.

U.S. / NATO new regional strategy – three core objectives

1. The primary regional objective for the U.S./NATO is to contain and neutralize the Taliban insurgency in the arc of instability that stretches across Afghanistan's western and southern borders. Along the south-western and eastern borders, that has meant a practical extension of the theatre of war into Pakistan to include FATA and parts of the NWFP. On the western borders, the regional strategy envisages a possible re-engagement with Iran to neutralize the challenge of growing insurgency. Lately, there has been a growing preoccupation with the support networks and sanctuaries available to the Taliban insurgents inside Pakistan's tribal belt. However, the rising insurgency in Afghanistan and the dangers inherent in the ongoing war against militancy inside Pakistan have impressed upon the U.S./NATO the limitations of the bilateral channels available. There is a realization that in order to address larger regional core issues which are impacting the level and capacity of the Pakistani State to not only take on the home-grown militants such as the TTP (Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan) but also to effectively destroy Afghan Taliban sanctuaries in its tribal belt, broader regional approaches have to be adopted. In the case of Iran, no bilateral channels exist which would mediate suspected Iranian covert support to Taliban factions.

2. The second objective deals with the trilateral context where the concerns of Pakistan's security establishment are addressed with reference to both India and Afghanistan: this context addresses the long-standing security fault lines within South Asia which have shaped the complex relationship and policies of Pakistan's military towards the Taliban and militants in the FATA region. Finally, there is a realization that any attempt to attach conditions that aim to change or restructure Pakistan's security calculus without affecting a change in its security environment is bound to be resisted. Unmediated involvement of regional states like India in Afghanistan has added another dangerous dimension and increased Pakistan's insecurities. Pakistan is not likely to move the bulk of its forces from its eastern borders in order to fight insurgents in the west, without a concomitant resolution of its security concerns related to its eastern neighbour, India.
3. The third objective is to launch a broad multilateral initiative where regional countries such as China, Iran, Russia and the Central Asian States and Pakistan's other strategic partners such as Saudi Arabia and UAE are brought on board to stabilize Afghanistan and coax Pakistan into dedicating all its military and political energies to eradicating militant movements. Within the regional scenario, the potential role of China in stabilizing both Afghanistan and Pakistan is assuming greater prominence. Pakistan and China enjoy a deep and strategic relationship that stretches over decades. China, which is Pakistan's largest investor, is poised to become the largest investor in Afghanistan as well with a 3.5-billion-dollar stake in the Aynak copper mines south of Kabul.

To date, there is no multilateral framework for addressing the various security concerns of regional States and mediating the various regional interests. Creating space for multilateral cooperation over Afghanistan has also acquired greater significance as there is a greater urgency in securing alternate transit routes for military and non-military supplies to U.S./NATO troops stationed in Afghanistan. Currently, the two transit routes through Pakistan supply 40 per cent of fuel and 80 per cent of non-fuel supplies for the war effort in Afghanistan. These routes are becoming increasingly vulnerable to militant attacks.

Multilateral platforms and the new regional strategy

There are a number of multilateral platforms that are being discussed as the likely forums to realize the above-mentioned regional objectives.

The U.S./NATO-sponsored contact group

Even before the coming into office of the Obama administration, various stakeholders floated the idea of the formation of a U.N.-authorized contact group on Afghanistan which would include all the five permanent members of the Security Council as well Afghanistan's neighbours including Iran. Such a group was also to include India and Saudi Arabia and tasked to promote dialogue between India and Pakistan on their respective interests in Afghanistan and find creative ways of solving the long-standing Kashmir issue. India's unwillingness to discuss the Kashmir issue on any multilateral forum and Pakistan's disinterest in participating in a forum that limits its interaction with India only to the situation in Afghanistan, have prevented the formation of the contact group so far.

The 6+3 format

Another initiative for a proposed multilateral group was floated in 2008 by Uzbekistan and is known as the "6+3" contact group. This proposed grouping comprises the six neighbouring States of Afghanistan along with three system level actors: the U.S., NATO and Russia. The group would function under the aegis of the UN. However, one factor that has hindered the formation of the group in its proposed form is that it does not include Afghanistan. The group is fashioned on the format of the older 6+2 group which was established under the UN supervision in the late 1990s for mediation between various Afghan factions when most of the world refused to recognize the Taliban government.

In its current incarnation, the 6+3 places a great degree of emphasis on seeking political solutions to the problems in Afghanistan through negotiations between all parties to the conflict which include the representatives of the Taliban. Although ambitious and bold in breaking away from militarized and force-based solutions to the Afghan problem, it is unlikely that without the inclusion of the Afghan government widely recognized as the legitimate authority, this proposal is ever going to become a reality.

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO)

Since its inception eight years ago, the SCO has risen in stature and has become one of the most dynamic regional organizations. It comprises six full members: China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and four observers: India, Pakistan, Iran and Mongolia. It was initially formed as a confidence-building mechanism to resolve border disputes. Over the past few years, the organization's activities have expanded to include increased military cooperation, intelligence-sharing,

and counterterrorism drills. The SCO has also intensified its focus on Afghanistan, and it appears likely that the SCO is poised to play a greater role in international efforts there in the near future.

The rising focus on SCO as a likely multilateral forum for broad cooperation on Afghanistan is a testament to the great transformational changes within the regional security environment over the last eight years. At the time of its formation, the SCO was perceived to be a reactive response of the two regional great powers, China and Russia, to the military intervention in Afghanistan by the U.S. and NATO. However, this growing and sustained military intervention has unleashed certain disruptive forces which are reacting either defensively to survive, or offensively, to maximize the opportunities created by the continued instability. The trans-border nature of these threats which include, terrorism, Islamic militancy, organized crime and narcotic networks, is creating serious security challenges as well as certain opportunities for the SCO for cooperation with the U.S. and NATO in stabilizing Afghanistan.

Yet, the space created for the SCO to operate in Afghanistan's stabilization is limited in scope due to the U.S./NATO military presence inside Afghanistan as well as certain inherent organizational limitations. It is important to analyze and unravel the Afghanistan Action Plan announced at the SCO Special Conference on Afghanistan and to see how well it ties in with the broad regional objectives set out by the new U.S./NATO regional strategy.

SCO and the Afghanistan Action Plan

An SCO Special Conference on Afghanistan was held in March 2009 in Moscow. Besides the full members and the four observers, it was also attended by U.N. Secretary General Ban ki Moon and representatives from the group of Eight, the E.U., and OSCE. Altogether, 36 countries sent their foreign ministers to the Conference. Afghanistan was also represented by Foreign Minister Rangin Dadfer Spanta.

However, the participation of Iran's Deputy Foreign Minister Mehdi Akhundzadeh along with the U.S. envoy at the Conference was a testament to the fact that cooperation with the SCO offers the U.S. and NATO an acceptable format to bring Iran into the dialogue on Afghanistan.

The SCO-Afghanistan Action Plan calls for joint operations in combating terrorism, drug trafficking and organized crime; for involving Afghanistan in a phased manner in SCO-wide collaboration in fighting terrorism in the region; and for inviting relevant Afghan State institutions to

take part in law-enforcement exercises conducted by the SCO. It also provides for stepping up the training of drug agencies, combating drug money laundering and improving border control. These measures are designed to set up anti-narcotics, anti-terrorism and anti-money laundering security belts around Afghanistan.

Although Afghanistan has not yet even applied for observer status at the SCO, the Action Plan actually reads like a road map for bringing Afghanistan into the SCO fold. However, Afghanistan is a part of an SCO-Afghanistan contact group established in November 2005 to provide a mechanism for the SCO member States to jointly contribute to reconstruction and stability in Afghanistan. President Karzai has also attended all SCO summits in recent years.

The conference reiterated the SCO's position that it is opposed to the expansion of U.S. military interests in Central Asia, but is willing to expand cooperation with the U.S. and NATO in Afghanistan, short of sending troops. Interestingly, President Obama announced a shift in U.S. policy emphasis on the same day as the SCO summit, promising greater consultation with Afghanistan's neighbours. Following greater interaction at the SCO Conference on Afghanistan attended by a U.S. representative for the first time, the U.S./NATO have recently signed transit agreements with Russia and some of the Central Asian States which allow for military and non-military supplies to go through their territories en route to Afghanistan. Hence, engagement with the SCO as a multilateral platform for cooperation on Afghanistan has also delivered on another important facet of the regional objectives outlined in the new U.S. strategy.

Although the Action Plan clearly addresses the security challenges that emanate from the situation inside Afghanistan and threaten the security of the SCO States, on closer examination its scope appears limited and modest. It limits its focus to counterterrorism and counterinsurgency strategies with their tried and tested reliance on securitized force based or kinetic approaches. At the same time, the last two elements of the Action Plan focus on building State capacity to combat terrorism and organized crime. Although international terrorist groups such as Al Qaeda remain active and a threat to peace and security of the regional States, their proliferation inside Afghanistan is a symptom of the larger problem of ungoverned spaces as is the escalating narcotic production. Any serious plan to stabilize Afghanistan must provide a political road map that distinguishes the often fine line between international terrorist groups and those insurgents who are simply fighting for political goals and against the presence of foreign troops on Afghan soil.

There is a general consensus emerging among most stakeholders in Afghanistan, even among certain sections of U.S. policymakers, that the eventual stabilization of Afghanistan will involve some negotiated settlement among the major stakeholders. The fact that this new thinking is not reflected in the SCO Action Plan points to certain self-imposed limitations dictated perhaps by divergent views among the member States.

However, the SCO, despite the modest nature of its Afghanistan Action Plan, offers the best opportunities for multilateral cooperation and for mediating divergent regional interests for the stabilization of Afghanistan. Both Iran and Pakistan are keenly waiting to be accepted as full members and remain cognizant of the vitality of the SCO in the current international environment and of its full future potential.