

Obama and Afghanistan^a

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Whenever there is a change of government in any country, especially in the United States – the sole super power of our time – there are hopes and expectations, as is the case with Barack Hussein Obama who was elected the 44th president of America in 2008. What makes Barack Obama's election to office so pivotal is that he is the president of the world's most powerful country, which not only makes him important for the American people but equally for the international community, particularly for States closely affected by and linked to the global menace of terrorism despite the fact that his predecessor's policies were, if not entirely but partially, responsible for the spread of extremism.

Although the expectations from Obama are huge and the challenges are no less, one does not foresee any dramatic, radical change in U.S. policy, as Obama will be no less compromising in the pursuit of American interests, particularly when it comes to fighting terrorism in Afghanistan and Pakistan's tribal region, the chief foreign policy challenge and priority of the Obama administration. However, what one does see in Obama is a more subtle approach in pursuing U.S. foreign policy which will be focused more on diplomacy than on just a military approach. It is expected that countries will find Obama accommodating and easy to work with.

He has indicated that he would be adopting a multilateral approach in dealing with issues regarding terrorism and ensuring his actions have legitimacy as opposed to the previous Bush administration that preferred a unilateral approach without considering the principle of legitimacy. However, at the same time, the U.S. will not relinquish its dominant role as the world's superpower, and will continue to be the biggest military power.

Obama has yet to devise an overall, coherent, comprehensive and workable policy regarding the war on terror. However, in the case of Afghanistan and Pakistan, he has started off by appointing Richard Holbrooke¹ (former Assistant Secretary of State for European Affairs during the Clinton era) as the special envoy for the two countries, and has also revealing the much anticipated strategic review of policy for the region referred to as AfPak,² underscoring the importance the Obama administration gives to a region it calls one of the world's hotspots – the other being the Middle East – for winning the war on terror.

Richard Holbrooke, known for brokering the Dayton Peace Accord that put an end to the war in Bosnia in 1995, is not the first special envoy for the region.

^a *This paper takes into account the relevant developments till July 2009 – editor.*

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The U.S. had appointed a similar envoy, Edmund McWilliams, during the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan in the 1980s,³ after which Peter Tomsen took over as the new special envoy to Afghanistan.⁴ However, after the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan, the post was abolished. Throughout his presidential campaign, Obama had stated that if elected, he would appoint a special envoy for both Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Following Obama's decision to appoint Holbrooke as the special envoy, Britain named Sherard Cowper-Coles⁵ (currently British ambassador to Afghanistan) as its new envoy for Pakistan and Afghanistan. Similarly, in an effort to intensify Germany's engagement in the region, Bernd Muetzelburg (currently Germany's ambassador to India) was appointed as Germany's special envoy to the region.⁶ The French President, Nicolas Sarkozy, named Pierre Lellouche as the special envoy⁷ who would be charged with strengthening France's role in supporting both the countries in their fight against Al Qaeda and the Taliban.

Regarded as "one of the most talented diplomats" by President Obama,⁸ Holbrooke's task will be to push both Afghanistan and Pakistan to cooperate with each other as well as with the US/NATO to fight and ultimately defeat terrorist elements such as Al Qaeda and the Taliban in the region. Speaking at the Munich Security Conference in March 2009, while underlining the difficulty of the task, Richard Holbrooke said that he had never in his political career seen any situation as difficult as the one involving Pakistan and Afghanistan.⁹ Hence, for the U.S., bringing viable peace and stability to both countries will be tougher than Iraq. Referring to the U.S. policy in Afghanistan, Holbrooke guaranteed an end to an era of "neglect" of the seven-plus-year war, and in its place pledged an increase in U.S. commitment with more troops, resources, and high-level attention

Obama has stated that his administration's new policy approach for the region would focus on greater economic development in Afghanistan, stepped-up diplomacy with Pakistan and better coordination with international partners¹⁰ than was demonstrated by his predecessor. In short, the U.S. objectives are:

1. to disrupt, dismantle and defeat Al Qaeda in Afghanistan and Pakistan, and
2. to prevent their return to either country in the future as the single greatest threat to Pakistan's future comes from Al Qaeda and its extremist allies.¹¹

But the questions here are: what methods will Obama employ to fulfil the above objectives and bring stability to the region, and will there be increased military operations or the use of sincere political initiatives?

Afghanistan

Eight years into the U.S.-led invasion of Afghanistan, the country continues to be engulfed in turmoil with no visible decrease in insecurity, violence and casualties. With no clear signs of progress and stability, Afghanistan continues to present the greatest challenge to the international community. Pledges made by former President Bush to rebuild Afghanistan, transform its economy, and liberate the masses¹² turned out to be mere words. At present, more than 90 per cent of Afghanistan's budget comes from international aid.¹³

The overall situation inside Afghanistan is increasingly unstable. The country continues to be confronted by a weak, ineffective and corrupt government and a thriving narcotics trade that accounts for more than 90 per cent of the world's opium.¹⁴ Afghanistan is 174th out of 178 countries on the U.N. Human Development Index,¹⁵ and is 176 out of 180 countries in Transparency International's corruption perceptions index.¹⁶ Huge amounts of money have been dispensed to help rebuild Afghanistan's shattered infrastructure¹⁷ and economy. However, most of the money allocated for Afghanistan has been spent on military operations whereas reconstruction and development has been slow and dogged by allegations of corruption and waste on the part of the government, aid agencies and contractors, curtailing the desperately needed development and reconstruction.

More than U.S. \$ 120 billion have been spent in Afghanistan during the last seven years. But, not much of that money has been used for development assistance for this war-ravaged country.¹⁸ According to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), contractor abuses have occurred during its oversight of \$ 25.6 million in U.S.-funded rebuilding projects in Afghanistan,¹⁹ as charged in the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) report published in June 2008. Stephane Dujarric, spokesman for UNDP, has said that the agency expected to repay \$ 1.5 million provided by USAID for rebuilding Afghanistan's infrastructure.

Despite the presence of more than 70,000 US/NATO forces,²⁰ the country has witnessed a growing Taliban insurgency which has gained momentum and continues to escalate, with a reported Taliban presence in 72 per cent of the country.²¹ Particularly since 2006, the security situation in Afghanistan has gone from bad to worse. Till date, it is believed that more than 22,000 people have died since the ouster of the Taliban regime in 2001.

Throughout his presidential campaign, President Barack Obama had stated that Afghanistan, the "central front"²² in the battle against terrorism, would be an important foreign policy objective as he wanted to shift the focus to Afghanistan which had been neglected due to the war in Iraq. Hence, for Obama and his team, Afghanistan, unlike Iraq, is the theatre for a legitimate war on terrorism and thus

without a doubt is a top priority agenda which will govern the new administration's foreign policy.

Inheriting the Bush administration's failed policy in Afghanistan, it is imperative that the new Obama administration clearly deliberates its policy on the country by addressing key issues that the Bush administration ignored.

Unlike the Bush administration, Obama's policy for Afghanistan will focus on military commitment backed by a vigorous and long-term investment policy focusing on reconstruction and development. With an expected annual budget of U.S. \$ 1 billion in non-military assistance, efforts will revolve around strengthening the Afghan government, accelerating training of the Afghan forces, reducing corruption, increasing economic development and negotiating with the moderate Taliban. With greater collaboration from its NATO allies, the Obama administration will focus on engaging Afghanistan more deeply than was demonstrated by the Bush government, by devoting more troops, money, resources and "hundreds" of civilians to help build the capacity of Afghan authorities to provide essential services and security for their people.²³

The Obama administration faces a long-haul challenge in Afghanistan. However, if Obama is sincere in changing the direction of the war in Afghanistan from a mission gone terribly wrong to a relatively successful one, he must ensure that the same mistakes are not repeated by avoiding President Bush's highly erroneous and thoughtless policies.

Violence

The year 2008 was among Afghanistan's most violent years since the ouster of the Taliban regime. According to an *Associated Press* count of figures provided by Afghan and Western officials, more than 6,000 people were killed in 2008,²⁴ the deadliest being the year 2007 in which the figure had been 6,500.²⁵ According to the United Nations, in 2008 alone, more than 2,100 civilians were killed, an overall rise of more than 40 per cent as compared to 2007,²⁶ out of which 973 civilian deaths were caused by the Taliban, whereas 236 by US/NATO forces.²⁷

Apart from the civilian casualties, the year 2008 was the deadliest for U.S. and NATO troops so far, in which 294 coalition troops were killed, including 155 U.S. soldiers (compared to 82 in 2007). So far, in 2009, 79 coalition troops have been killed in the ongoing operations against the Taliban.²⁸ The year 2009 is thus expected to be far worse than the previous one.

Governance

Among the various challenges that continue to plague Afghanistan, governance continues to be a major one. The country continues to be confronted

by a weak, ineffective and corrupt government. Commonly referred to as the 'mayor of Kabul' for his inability to establish the writ of the government and deliver, Karzai and his government have failed to win the loyalty and trust of the Afghan people. In fact, Karzai's lack of performance and inability to reach out to the Afghan people has brought the once unpopular and ousted Taliban back to fill in the vacuum thus created. As an International Crisis Group report has pointed out, "President Karzai's government still lacks the political will to tackle a culture of impunity and to end political interference in the appointment and operations of police."²⁹

Both domestic and international criticism has increased regarding the Afghan government's policies on human rights and its lack of good governance and corruption. In an interview to the *BBC* in March 2009, the Afghan finance minister, Anwar-ul-Haq Ahadi, said that the "U.S. [had] allowed corruption to take place in the Afghan government." Referring to President Karzai, Ahadi stated that he continuously denied any responsibility for corruption. Once in power, Karzai gave senior police posts to former warlords and human rights abusers. A series of investigations has revealed that many in the Karzai administration, including his brother, Ahmed Wali Karzai, have been involved in the country's opium trade.

Although Karzai has supposedly remained America's best option in Afghanistan since the ouster of the Taliban regime in 2001, clearly he has not been able to govern. According to a survey carried out by *ABC News*, the *BBC* and *ARD German TV* in collaboration with the Afghan Centre for Socio-Economic and Opinion Research, support for Karzai has declined from 83 per cent in 2005 to 52 per cent in 2008, while support for his government has also plummeted from 80 per cent in 2005 to 49 per cent in 2008.³⁰

Despite the fact that Karzai enjoyed particularly good relations with the previous Bush administration, the new U.S. administration under President Obama has been critical of Karzai. Although President Karzai termed the inauguration of President Barack Obama the start of a "promising new era of understanding between Afghanistan and the U.S.,"³¹ relations between the two sides commenced on a shaky footing. After assuming office, both President Barack Obama and his Special Envoy for Pakistan and Afghanistan, Richard Holbrooke, were critical of Karzai and his government for being ineffective and corrupt.

Speaking to reporters during a prime-time news conference, the first of his presidency, in February 2009, President Obama said that "the Afghan government appeared to be detached from the surrounding community it is supposed to serve."³² The then NATO Secretary General, Jaap de Hoop Scheffer, followed that up by voicing concern over Karzai's inability to deliver. In an interview to the *Washington Post* on January 17, 2009, he said that Afghanistan's

current problems were because of “too little good governance (and not) too much Taliban.”³³

In fact, since 2007, tensions have been mounting between Karzai and the international community, with the West criticising Karzai’s inability to establish the writ of his government, failure to address corruption and clamp down on the growing opium trade. Similarly, Karzai has also been quite critical of US/NATO policies in Afghanistan on account of lack of a coherent strategy, weak international coordination, the failure to build Afghan capacity and poor conduct in the war, particularly the number of civilian casualties caused by the Western troops. Karzai has also accused the West of failing to go after the real enemy, Al Qaeda and the Taliban and their sanctuaries and training grounds in neighbouring Pakistan.

Karzai has insisted that the U.S./NATO focus its "war on terror" on militant sanctuaries across the border in Pakistan.³⁴ At one point, Karzai even threatened that Afghanistan would seek a new arms deals with Russia and to hold a referendum constraining U.S. and NATO operations.³⁵

Elections

The second presidential elections in Afghanistan's history (first held in 2004) for which the U.S. has announced to donate 40 million dollars, were originally scheduled for April 2009. However, due to the escalating violence, they have been postponed to August 20, 2009, with an estimated 16.5 million people registered to vote this year.³⁶ Hamid Karzai, a Pashtun from the Popalzai tribe and member of Afghanistan's largest ethnic group, has governed Afghanistan since 2001. In 2004, Karzai won the first presidential poll in Afghanistan’s history. With rampant corruption and thriving opium trade, it is now estimated that about 85 per cent of Afghans intend to vote for someone other than Karzai.³⁷

With the Taliban boycotting the elections they have termed “a sham” and pledging to increase attacks, the period leading to the polls will be critical and decisive for Karzai’s re-election. It is no secret that the international community and the U.S. in particular had backed President Karzai in the 2004 elections. The most important question now has been whether the international community will extend its support to Karzai for a second term and whether it has a better alternative to Karzai. Initially, one assumed that with critical comments coming from the international community indicating a much lesser degree of support for Karzai, Obama, unlike Bush, would not depend upon Karzai alone and that a possible search was on for a new Afghan president.

However, despite Karzai’s poor performance and growing unpopularity at home and abroad, he does remain the strongest candidate in the country, not for his competence but for his experience and familiarity for having remained at the helm of affairs since the ouster of the Taliban regime in 2001. Hence, keeping in

mind the state of affairs in Afghanistan and the fact that the international community has invested so heavily in Karzai, he is most likely to get a second term.

Obama may not have any other alternative but to accept Karzai for a second term and to work with him while putting pressure on him to deliver and to hold him accountable. In fact, this changed, albeit somewhat discreet, U.S. stance towards Karzai was first made evident by Richard Holbrooke, who stated that his country would neither support nor oppose any candidate.³⁸ Also, the trilateral meeting between Presidents Obama, Karzai and Asif Ali Zardari in May 2009 saw an abrupt end to U.S. criticism of Karzai.

The head of Afghanistan's election commission, Azizullah Lodin, while announcing the final list of 41 candidates on June 12, 2009, said that most of the candidates running for the presidential office were not eligible as many of them were illiterate, lacked professional knowledge and held dual citizenship which the Afghan Constitution disallows. However, Karzai's main contenders include former finance minister Ashraf Ghani and former foreign minister Abdullah Abdullah.

Despite allegations regarding Karzai's trying to win people off (the former Afghan foreign minister and presidential candidate, Abdullah Abdullah, in an interview to the *AFP* on May 30, 2009, accused president Karzai of offering him the post of secretary general if he withdrew from the election), he clearly seems to be leading and would most likely will get a second term. In April 2009, Mohammad Qasim Fahim, key founder of the National Front and from the country's second largest Tajik ethnic group, announced support for Karzai.

At the same time, a former warlord accused of human rights violations and war crimes by several rights groups and Western diplomats has been chosen as Karzai's first vice president. Afghanistan's Independent Human Rights Commission had in April 2009 said that warlords and those who have committed rights violations in the past 30 years should be barred from running either for president or the two deputy posts. Nevertheless, two key Afghan opposition groups comprising Hazara and Uzbek ethnic minorities, the Hezb-i-Wahdat party headed by Haji Mohammad Mohaqiq and the Junbish-i-Melli party founded by ethnic Uzbek General Abdul Rashid Dostum and headed by Sayed Noorullah, have pledged support to Hamid Karzai, furthering his chances of victory.

However, it remains to be seen whether Karzai would retain the powers he has, as there has been talk of the possible creation of a new chief executive or a prime ministerial post, primarily for a division of responsibilities between the central and local authorities in which money will be diverted from the central government in Kabul to the provinces. Its basic aim will be to have someone reliable who can keep a check over Karzai and be accountable to both the Afghans as well as the international community. Although no names have been

announced, Mohammed Hanif Atmar, Afghan Interior Minister, is believed to be America's likely choice. Afghan presidential hopeful and former foreign minister, Abdullah Abdullah, has also announced that he would revise Afghanistan's Constitution to install a prime minister or secretary general.

However, Karzai has criticized the idea, stating that he would resist any dilution of power, and accused an unnamed foreign government of trying to weaken the central government in Kabul. He declared that Afghanistan would never be a puppet State. Speaking to reporters in June 2009, President Karzai's spokesman, Humayoun Hamidzada, on the other hand, said that the president had yet to decide on the matter.

Military assistance

Obama's military strategy in Afghanistan is based on deploying additional soldiers and marines to counter the Taliban insurgency and shift emphasis to training and increasing the strength and ability of the Afghan Security Forces. In January 2009, President Obama announced to send an additional 30,000 troops as part of a "surge"³⁹ to tackle the resurgent Taliban and the deteriorating security situation inside Afghanistan. In February 2009, the initial batch of 17,000 troops was dispatched to be stationed in the south of Afghanistan, which is considered to be the Taliban's stronghold. The deployment consists of 8,000 marines, 4,000 army soldiers and 5,000 support staff. At present; there are 36,000 U.S. forces in Afghanistan, including 17,500 serving with the NATO-led coalition and another 18,500 conducting training and counter-insurgency. The U.S. military spends some \$ 100 million a day fighting Taliban insurgents in Afghanistan.

However, despite the additional 30,000 US troops, the number is still less than what U.S. commanders have demanded to quell the growing insurgency. Even with the arrival of additional U.S. troops, the number of foreign soldiers in Afghanistan will reach about 100,000, still short of the troops NATO and U.S. commanders have been asking for to completely secure and stabilise Afghanistan.

In 2006, Lt. Gen. David Richards, then commander of NATO forces in southern Afghanistan, ordered a surge in troops in order to curb the Taliban insurgency in Kandahar and Helmand provinces, the stronghold of the Taliban. He anticipated that the surge would create an environment in which the Taliban would have had enough of fighting. Since then, troop levels have quadrupled from to 70,000, and both Kandahar and Helmand continue to be Taliban strongholds.

Although there are high expectations in the U.S. that the surge would help quell the Taliban insurgency, the truth is that it will produce only short-term local advantages (i.e., buy time to expand the Afghan army and police), but will result in no overall, long-term improvement, and will only result in costing the U.S.

more money and casualties. Military commanders have also recognized that any "surge" in foreign troops can ultimately only buy time. Many suspect that Obama's real aim behind the surge is to try and shift the military balance in favour of U.S. and NATO, away from the growing military strength of the Taliban, and thus force the Taliban to either retreat or come to some sort of a compromise through negotiations. However, this clearly has not been the case since the Taliban insurgency has gained immense momentum and continues to escalate. Hence, it is unlikely if the increase in troops will alter the balance in a significant way.

Afghan Security Forces

Obama's military policy also revolves around investing in and strengthening of Afghanistan's national forces. The Afghan National Army (ANA) which currently stands at 70-80,000 soldiers is expected to be raised to a well-trained force of 134,000 by 2011 that is effectively coordinated and resourced with airlift capability and more joint NATO operations. President Obama announced the deployment of 4,000 U.S. troops in the spring of 2009 specifically assigned for training Afghan security personnel. He also said that every U.S. unit comprising trainers would be partnered with an Afghan unit which would in turn have a NATO unit comprising additional trainers from the NATO ally States.

In 2008, the Afghan National Army (ANA) rose by 28 per cent. Since 2007, 26,000 new Afghan soldiers have been trained each year, with an expected 28,000 to be trained in 2009. Although the ANA led 62 per cent of operations in 2008, the aim is to create a force that can not only plan but also execute operations independently without any external support. Hence, to develop the ANA into a mobile and technologically advanced force will take time. As of March 15, 2009, the ANA stood at 82,781 soldiers, which is to be expanded to a force of 134,000 troops by December 2011.⁴⁰

Spread regionally throughout Afghanistan, the ANA consists of 160 units of five ground corps and one air corps. The establishment of the ANA is considered to be the only achievement in Afghanistan, with units said to be operating independently of NATO forces, with just support from foreign troops. Since 2007, 568 ANA soldiers have been killed in the fighting. Under the U.S. military modernization programme, the ANA, which currently uses Soviet-era Kalashnikov AK-47 assault rifles, will be given U.S.-made M-16 and M-4 rifles, M-203 grenade launchers and 4,000 armoured Humvee vehicles. As many as 179 training teams will be needed for its expansion to 134,000. Sustaining the ANA costs \$ 2.2 billion a year which is expected to be raised to \$ 3 billion a year after the proposed expansion, which itself will cost \$ 17 billion⁴¹.

As of March 15, 2009, the strength of the Afghan National Police (ANP) stood at 80,356, which is to be increased to 82,000 by December 2009. The ANP consists of six organisations including 40,000 uniformed police, 17,000 border police and 5,000 police civil order, with posts in nearly all of Afghanistan's 400 districts.⁴² Between 2007 and 2009, more than 1,504 officers have been killed in action. In 2002, Germany was given the task of creating and training an Afghan police force, but it spent only \$ 80 million by 2007, when EUPOL took over the task. EUPOL's budget is \$ 87 million (64 million euros) until November 2009.

Also, the U.S. undertook responsibility for imparting training to the ANP. Although progress has been made in raising the force, it is plagued by corruption and lags behind the army which is considered to be more professional. According to a U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) report released in March-April 2009, America still lacks forces (1,500 or more soldiers) needed to carry out 'its mentoring program'. Since 2007, the ANP has suffered 60 per cent of all security force casualties.

The sums allocated by EUPOL are dwarfed by the amount spent by the U.S. military, which budgeted \$ 2.5 billion on retraining the police in 2007 and a further \$ 800 million in 2008. According to the U.S. military, due to a shortfall of 2,300, police trainers and advisers from the ANA programme were shifted to help build the ANP, weakening the army training programme.

Afghan Public Protection Force

The Obama administration agreed to establish, train and finance local armed militias to fight the growing Taliban insurgency. On January 31, the Afghan interior minister announced the launch of the Afghan Public Protection Force (APPF) which, according to him, would be responsible for providing protection to the people, providing security for the highways, schools, clinics and other government institutions. The APPF will train and arm members of the community with Kalashnikov rifles as used by the Afghan police to help provide security and maintain law and order against the Taliban. According to Col. Greg Julian, the U.S. military's spokesman in Afghanistan, U.S. Special Forces soldiers will mentor, train and give back-up to the new village forces, but Afghanistan's interior ministry will be in charge of the programme.⁴³

The new force, which officials stress is an inclusive force with representation from all ethnic groups, is the latest in a long list of attempts by U.S. and Afghan officials to strengthen the government's writ and deny Taliban space. It has been criticized by many who believe that such an initiative would further aggravate the current security situation in Afghanistan by leading to increased tribal rivalries or risk being infiltrated by the Taliban. Many also believe that such armed local forces will be unreliable due to the force's short training and they could very easily be tempted or forced into joining a stronger group be it the Taliban, the warlords or criminal gangs, further creating a culture of arms despite years of

efforts by the UN and the Afghan authorities under the UNDP to disarm society. The UN has spent millions of dollars on its Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration Programme⁴⁴ which was launched within months of the Taliban's ouster from power.

According to the U.S. Government Accountability Office, out of 242,000 weapons shipped to Afghanistan by the U.S. between December 2004 and June 2008, an estimated 87,000 (one-third) are unaccounted for, and are alleged to have been siphoned off by corrupt Afghan officials to the Taliban.⁴⁵ Matt Waldman, head of policy for Oxfam International, a British-based aid group, has been apprehensive about the formation of the APPF, stating that the local armed groups with limited training, minimal command and control arrangements were at a real risk from infiltration, co-option and subversion by militant or criminal groups.⁴⁶

Another pivotal question that arises from arming ordinary men is that, once areas have been secured, will they hand in their arms? Or, be used for other purposes? A similar approach was adopted by Gen. David Petraeus in Iraq, who engaged Sunni sheiks in casting out Al Qaeda. Although violence was reduced to a considerable extent, it must be understood that what worked in Iraq will not necessarily work in Afghanistan.

NATO

Afghanistan continues to be a critical test for the 26-member alliance by undermining NATO in its first out of area combat mission and risking the Alliance's credibility as a successful organization, particularly in external operations. The U.S. and NATO's mission in Afghanistan is a case of 'large space and insufficient force ratios'. During the last NATO summit in Romania in April 2008, apart from disagreements over Georgia and Ukraine as possible future NATO members, there were differences of opinion regarding NATO troop expansion and deployment in Afghanistan, particularly on troop deployment in the combat zones, i.e., north and south of Afghanistan.

Although the Obama administration has acknowledged that there neither is nor can be a long-term military solution to the problem in Afghanistan and that talks with moderate Taliban leaders will eventually have to be pursued, the U.S. continues to emphasize the need for more combat troops on the ground to curb the growing insurgency. NATO members stand divided on the ongoing mission in Afghanistan which they are far from winning. This was clearly highlighted at the NATO meeting of defence ministers in Poland (February 19-20, 2009) which underlined serious differences between the allies regarding the way the mission was going in Afghanistan. Majority of the NATO member States are clearly reluctant in offering more troops for ISAF operation in Afghanistan. At present, there are a total of 56,000 troops in Afghanistan under NATO's ISAF command,

from 41 different countries. Most of the combat missions in Afghanistan are undertaken by troops from the U.S., Britain, Canada and the Netherlands.

Speaking at the meeting, NATO secretary general Jaap de Hoop Scheffer expressed great concern and disappointment in the manner in which the mission in Afghanistan has been conducted, highlighting failure in the south and east of the country plagued by insurgency, drugs and lack of effective government which had only increased the Afghans' frustration. Clearly, the mission in Afghanistan has not gone as the Alliance had hoped. The worsening security situation has prevented NATO member nations from contributing extra troops needed to curb the growing Taliban insurgency.

NATO-led ISAF operations have constantly been hindered by national caveats that restrict the operations of many units deployed in Afghanistan. Such restrictions limit deployment areas and types of missions for particular national contingents or impose other criteria that reduce the effectiveness and flexibility of ISAF operations. Although NATO has always been reluctant in sending troops to meet the increasing security challenges in Afghanistan, NATO member States should be prepared for U.S. calls to be more instrumental and forthcoming in dealing with the multiple security and development challenges facing Afghanistan.

The United States would like NATO to provide more troops to the ISAF mission tasked with stabilizing the country with deployment in combat zones, strengthening the EU police mission (EUPOL) and combat operations than its member States have been or are willing to offer. At the same time, the U.S. would also like NATO to broaden its share of responsibilities and increase efforts to strengthen governance, improve the rule of law, provide more developmental assistance, and be more involved in drug interdiction and poppy eradication.

The U.S. and Britain have long been calling for other NATO members to deploy more troops and equipment. However, many NATO members have been less responsive, as many among NATO believe that emphasis needs to be laid on a new strategy, with less emphasis on the military aspect. Hence, Obama will without a doubt find resistance on the subject of getting more troops from NATO allies (with the possible exception of the UK) and will find it difficult to secure removal of caveats on the employment of troops already present in Afghanistan.

In such a situation, NATO will have to play its part by stepping up contributions to meet the 'softer' but equally crucial security and developmental needs of Afghanistan. The U.S., on the other hand, may simply go it alone regarding additional troops for combating the insurgency which has been the case since the war in Afghanistan began in October 2001.

Thus, Afghanistan represents a pivotal test for future U.S.-NATO relations and whether a lasting and strong transatlantic strategic partnership can be formed.

Taliban

The official U.S. stance regarding the Taliban had been made evident in the remarks of the Assistant Secretary of State for South Asian Affairs, Robin Raphel, at a United Nations meeting in New York, on November 18 1996. She had then said, “Despite nearly universal misgivings about the Taliban, it must be acknowledged as a significant factor in the Afghan equation and one that will not simply disappear any time soon. The Taliban control more than two-thirds of the country; they are Afghan, they are indigenous, they have demonstrated staying power. The reasons they have succeeded so far have little to do with military prowess or outside military assistance. Indeed, when they have engaged in truly serious fighting, the Taliban have not fared so well. The real source of their success has been the willingness of many Afghans, particularly Pashtuns, to tacitly trade unending fighting and chaos for a measure of peace and security, even with severe social restrictions ... It is not in the interest of Afghanistan or any of us here that the Taliban be isolated.”⁴⁷

Unfortunately it has taken eight years of violence, bloodshed and unrest for the U.S. and its allies to accept that there can be no peace in Afghanistan until a sincere and legitimate political reconciliation effort is initiated with the Taliban. The new U.S. administration of Barack Obama has expressed support for reconciliation talks with members of the Taliban or former Al Qaeda supporters who reject violence. According to Hillary Clinton, they should be offered an honourable form of reconciliation and reintegration into a peaceful society, if they are willing to abandon violence, break with Al Qaeda, and support the Constitution. The U.S. must spare no effort to bring back to normal life all those from the ranks of the Taliban who have no association with Al Qaeda and are willing to embrace peace and accept the Constitution.

After the horrific events of 9/11, and despite the fact that the perpetrators were not from Afghanistan, no sincere and serious efforts were made to negotiate with the Taliban. The U.S. spent barely a month in determining the fate of Afghanistan by deciding to launch operation freedom, and thus began its operations on October 12, 2001. Despite the Taliban’s misrepresentation of Islam, had the U.S. been serious in engaging and negotiating with them about the handing over of Osama bin Laden, instead of hastily launching operation freedom a month after the events of 9/11, Al Qaeda might not have been able to establish themselves in Afghanistan and the region.

President Obama, unlike Bush, knows that Afghanistan cannot be stabilized unless the issue of Pashtun alienation is addressed. The Pashtuns constitute the largest ethnic group. The Taliban who are Pashtun need to be brought into the political process, and need to be accepted as a legitimate part of Afghan society. In an interview to *The New York Times* on March 8, 2009, Obama declared that the U.S. was not winning the war in Afghanistan and the door was open to a reconciliation process in which the American military would reach out to

moderate elements of the Taliban. The Taliban, like other factions, need to have a legitimate share in the Afghan government, as do all other factions. Hence, trying to make some breakthrough with the Taliban will be a top priority of the Obama administration. However, the pivotal question is identifying the main groups responsible for the growing insurgency which has spread from the south and east of the country to the outskirts of Kabul.

The armed opposition groups in Afghanistan

The Taliban, under the command of Mullah Omar, is the chief opposing faction and core of the insurgency. Head of the Quetta shura (council), Mullah Omar controls and commands the overall policy of the Taliban, whereas day-to-day tactical decisions regarding the insurgency, i.e., where and when to launch attacks, are left to the field commanders. Despite differences between the commanders, the Taliban have remained fairly united with few signs of major splits. Describing the relationship between the Taliban and al-Qaeda, Zabiullah Mujahid has said the two are separate. "They [Al Qaeda] are global, we are just in the region," he said. He said the Taliban welcome some Al Qaeda fighters who came to Afghanistan, "but we don't fight under their instruction."⁴⁸

Al Qaeda, along with other militant factions alleged to have close ties with the group, particularly the Haqqani network, have also been playing a key role in propelling the insurgency. Although some former Taliban officials have spoken of abandoning "foreigners" as part of a possible peace deal, due to Al Qaeda's strong-arm tactics and divergence of agendas, Al Qaeda leaders, including bin Laden, continued to take refuge in Afghanistan following the 2001 U.S.-led invasion.

The Haqqani network, led by Jalaluddin Haqqani, 70, is said to be under the overall command of the Taliban under Mullah Omar, as well as having ties with Al Qaeda. Haqqani rose to prominence during the 1980s, receiving weapons and funds from the CIA and Saudi Arabia to fight the Soviet occupation and has also had long-standing links with Pakistan's military Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI). Leadership of the group now lies with Sirajuddin Haqqani, Haqqani's eldest son, who is said to be more radical than his father.

Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's Hizb-i-Islami was one of the main Mujahedin groups fighting the Soviet invasion in the 1980. After the Soviet withdrawal, and the resulting civil war, Hekmatyar fought and made brief alliances with the other Mujahedin factions. However, in 1997, after losing to the Taliban, he fled to Iran. Members of his group joined the Taliban. After the September 11 attacks, Hekmatyar declared himself against the U.S. invasion, and returned to fight in alliance with the Taliban. His Hizb-i-Islami is mostly active in the north-east of Afghanistan fighting U.S. and Afghan forces. However, the group are against the practice of suicide attacks. Both Hekmatyar and the Taliban have had a unified

stance regarding possible reconciliation, i.e., only possible after foreign forces withdraw.

Having made a strong and steady comeback, proving to be stern adversaries, the Taliban are actively operating in more than 72 per cent of the country up from 54 per cent in 2007.⁴⁹ Within a span of a year (2007-08), the Taliban's presence in the country has increased by a staggering 18 per cent.⁵⁰ It appears that the Taliban are in no particular rush to hold talks, as the group seems to be confident that they are winning in Afghanistan not only in military terms but also in the sense that their presence and influence is growing among the masses. President Karzai, while talking to a UN delegation, has said that the Taliban are having their strongholds even in areas where the U.S./NATO troops are operating in great strength. Within a short span of time, their presence and influence has not remained confined to the group's traditional areas of control such as Zabul, Helmand, Urzgan and Kandahar. In fact, since late 2007, they have been actively operating in the provinces of Logar, Wardak, Ghazni and Kabul, the capital.⁵¹

Under a 2002 amnesty programme that was highly criticized in Afghanistan and the West, President Karzai managed to convince many to lay down their arms and reconcile with the government. As a result, quite a few former Taliban were elected to the Afghan parliament and senate. Karzai has long campaigned for reconciliation with the Taliban as a key way to clamp down on the growing insurgency in Afghanistan. Although opposed by the Bush administration, President Obama has stressed on talking to the Taliban and reconciling with the relatively moderate members, often referred to as the reconcilable,⁵² those that can be separated from the most hard-core elements as was the case with Mullah Salam Ullah, a former high-ranking Taliban commander and currently governor of Musa Qala in southern Helmand province.

Hence, Obama is expected to encourage such programmes, and focus on understanding, cooperating and reconciling with the tribal structures by working with local leaders to ferret out the militants. Proposals of providing tribal councils with more opportunities for economic development and greater autonomy in running local affairs are being considered. By empowering such councils, tribes would be able to recruit men for "local security forces" by evicting insurgents rather than provide them shelter, thus weakening the Taliban's ability to exploit tribal rivalries.

Proposals for including the Taliban in Afghan politics and allowing them to take part in the upcoming general elections through political parties or running independently, are strongly being considered.⁵³ Other proposals such as changing the Afghan Constitution and taking senior Taliban figures off the UN blacklist are also being discussed. Afghan President Hamid Karzai also called on the UN to remove the names of Taliban leaders who are not part of Al Qaeda from its blacklist, as a first step towards peace talks.⁵⁴ The UN's "Consolidated List"

includes the names of 142 individuals associated with the Taliban and 254 with Al Qaeda, and provides for sanctions, including freezing assets, travel ban and arms embargo.

In an attempt at establishing relations with the Muslims on a new footing, President Obama's views regarding the plight of Muslims, his apparent willingness to improve relations with the Muslim world as the "US had a stake in the well-being of the Muslims" and possible reconciliation with moderate Taliban, sent strong and positive signals throughout the Muslim world. Although the Taliban welcomed Obama's views regarding the Muslim world, the Taliban chief spokesman, Qari Yusuf Ahmadi, said that the group had "no problem with Obama" as long as he withdrew U.S. forces out of Afghanistan.⁵⁵ Ahmadi advised the new U.S. administration to learn lessons from the mistakes of former President Bush and the Soviets, while reiterating the group's cardinal demand that talks would only take place once all foreign forces were out of Afghanistan. Until then, the group would continue to fight.

The Taliban of today are in fact the Mujahedin of yesterday referred to by President Reagan as the "moral equivalent of America's founding fathers" created by the U.S., Saudi Arabia, and Pakistan to fight the Soviets during the Afghan jihad. They have over the years evolved into what clearly seems a dedicated nationalist force whose main aim is to "liberate Afghanistan from foreign forces". In 2008, the Taliban leader, Mullah Mohammad Omar, told the *AFP* that "the Taliban are fighting to free the country. We are not a threat to the world."

Despite numerous attempts by Karzai for talks with the Taliban as well as offering key positions in the government to insurgent leaders (for example, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar) willing to put down their weapons and join the political establishment, the Taliban have remained adamant, sticking to their demands that negotiations or dialogue would take place under certain preconditions which include the complete withdrawal of U.S. and NATO forces and that Shariah be enforced. In a telephone interview to the Nine Eleven NEFA Foundation, Taliban Spokesman, Zabiullah Mujahid, said that taking over the government was not the Taliban's target. If that were the aim, the Taliban could have continued to rule simply by handing over Osama to the U.S.

Because of the mismanaged and poorly conducted war in Afghanistan, the battle for hearts and minds has also been lost. The masses who initially welcomed the U.S. as liberators who would rescue the Afghan people from turmoil and suppression, have in fact once again turned towards the Taliban. Fully aware of how the West abandoned Afghanistan after the Soviet pullout, the masses know that one day the U.S./NATO troops will withdraw from Afghanistan, whereas the Taliban, despite their numerous faults, will not abandon Afghanistan and will continue to prevail, proving that the Taliban are a

legitimate part of Afghanistan and the people, and therefore cannot be ignored or pushed aside as the Bush administration thought they had done.

However, despite statements from the Taliban refusing to hold talks with Karzai or the U.S., there have been reports claiming that the group is somewhat divided and at odds on the issue of holding talks with the government and coming to some sort of peaceful settlement. It was, for instance, reported that in September 2008, talks for possible reconciliation were held between Afghan officials and the Taliban's former foreign minister, Maulvi Wakil Ahmad Mutawakkil, and former Taliban envoy to Pakistan, Mullah Abdul Salam Zaeef, under Saudi arbitration in the holy city of Makkah.⁵⁶

Nevertheless, both the Afghan government and Muttawakil denied that such talks had taken place. Muttawakil told the Pakistan-based *AIP* news agency that meetings with delegations from different countries took place in Saudi Arabia regarding Afghanistan's problems where concerns were expressed. But, neither there were formal negotiations, nor did Taliban representatives attend those discussions.⁵⁷ Speaking to the *APF*, Spokesman for President Hamid Karzai, Homayun Hamidzada, revealed that Afghan religious scholars visited Saudi Arabia during the holy month of Ramadan and attended a dinner with King Abdullah but there were no negotiations with the Taliban. The government did however want such talks in order to find a way to end a Taliban-led insurgency, he added.⁵⁸

In the latest round of reported talks, Western officials, the Afghan government and Taliban-linked mediators have been engaged in secret negotiations to bring Gulbuddin Hekmatyar into Afghanistan's political process. Hekmatyar would be offered asylum in Saudi Arabia, after which he would be allowed to return to Afghanistan with immunity from prosecution. The British government is said to be backing that element of the deal. Ghairat Baheer, one of Hekmatyar's two sons-in-law, released from the U.S. prison at Bagram airbase in Afghanistan in May 2007 after six years in custody, is believed to be instrumental in the talks that have been taking place in Dubai, London and Afghanistan since the beginning of 2009.

Gulbaldin Hekmatyar, the former Afghan prime minister, has been in hiding for seven years. Having at one time or another either fought or been in alliance with almost every faction in Afghanistan, there is every chance that Hekmatyar may make another deal should that become politically opportune. The British, unlike the U.S., have been supporting the reconciliation process, and it is believed that British Intelligence officials have been instrumental in engaging with members of the Taliban through tribal councils.⁵⁹

However, what is important here is the fact that those members of the Taliban that have been running the insurgency and hold the key to ending the violence in Afghanistan are the so-called hardcore Taliban. Even if differences or

divisions have come up within the Taliban, the group appears to have a unified stance when it comes to the demand of foreign withdrawal from Afghanistan. Therefore, Obama will either try to reach out to the hardcore Taliban, convince them to put their arms down and come to the negotiating table, or will simply try to create divisions within the group by reaching out to the moderate Taliban in the hope of splitting the group. Dialogue with the rank-and-file insurgents is unlikely to persuade the senior hardcore members of the Taliban including the leadership to renounce violence or stop recruiting, as has been demonstrated in the past. However, talks led by Islamic Afghan clerics and Saudi officials may prove useful.

Violence never has been, nor will be, the solution to instability in Afghanistan. The only way forward is through dialogue and consultation. The U.S./NATO/Coalition partners must realize and acknowledge as some have done, that there can be no peace until the Taliban are included in the political process. Poor diplomacy and culturally insensitive policies towards the Pashtuns must stop. Obama should engage in consistent dialogue with Pashtun leaders in an effort to establish a relationship of mutual cooperation. The Pashtuns are not terrorists, unlike al-Qaeda, a global network that has brought terror to the Pashtuns. This is not to advocate that the U.S. should accept or allow a return of the pre-2001 Taliban government, but all parties to the conflict will have to find a middle path as there has to be some give and take on both sides.

A possible compromise could be achieved if the U.S. insists that the Taliban renounce violence, accept the Afghan Constitution, be included in the political process and seek power through the electoral process. In return, the West will have to agree to at least two principles; an exit strategy with a timetable for a possible early pullout of foreign forces, and the establishment of a neutral interim government until free and fair elections are held. History has shown that all insurgencies, no matter how prolonged, have by and large been ultimately resolved or curbed through negotiations. Hence, talking to the Taliban is the only viable solution.

Opium

Among Obama's numerous challenges inside Afghanistan, curbing the drug trade is paramount. At present, Afghanistan produces around 90 per cent of the world's opium.⁶⁰ Curbing the opium trade is an important priority of President Obama who has expressed his intention to revive and develop the Afghan economy which at present is dominated by illicit drugs. However, what will be important here is the strategy Obama adopts to counter the opium trade.

Since the ouster of the Taliban from power, opium-poppy cultivation in Afghanistan has increased dramatically. In fact, the group had enforced an effective ban on poppy, reducing the crop to 42 per cent in 2000. The failure of the Afghan government and the international coalition forces in establishing the

writ of the State has resulted in the revival of the drug trade. Despite the fact that crop eradication and the destruction of drug processing facilities was a high priority of the Bush administration, the drug trade continues to boom, contributing at least 50-60 per cent of the gross domestic product of the country. Drug trafficking accounts for over U.S. \$ 3 billion which sustains the warlords as well as the Taliban insurgency.

The U.S., in coordination with the Britain, other NATO countries and the Afghan government, had launched a counter-drug strategy that included tougher coercive measures against traffickers and growers, as well as rewards for localities with reduced poppy cultivation. According to the Afghan counter-narcotics service, 7,700 tons of raw opium was produced in Afghanistan in 2008, 500 tons less than in 2007. Eighteen of Afghanistan's 34 provinces are now considered opium-free, compared to 13 in 2007, and six in 2006. However, despite reduction, production has soared beyond demand, and drug barons are thought to have stockpiled enough opium to ensure heroin supply even if opium production slows.

The United States alone spends over \$ 800 m a year on counter-narcotics efforts which have proved to be ineffective.⁶¹ U.S. envoy to the region, Richard Holbrooke, has been quite critical of previous U.S. measures to eradicate opium as they had not stopped the Taliban raising vast sums from the trade. Continual reversals in the insurgency have forced the Taliban to form alliances with drug dealers. They have become dependent on the money and manpower supplied by the drug dealers who, in turn, need the Taliban to stave off the poppy-eradication campaigns of the government.

Obama, who has referred to the drug trade as the major driver of corruption in Afghanistan, has called for support from NATO forces to bolster local counter-narcotics efforts to destroy drug labs, equipment and caches. The new administration has also urged efforts to identify other agricultural programmes for Afghan farmers to replace their dependency on the illegal drug trade. Obama has announced to send federal drug enforcement agents under the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) to Afghanistan to curb the massive opium trade by targeting "higher-level drug lords". The DEA, which ran a campaign against drug cartels in South America, is expected to build a force of 80 agents and additional analysts by the autumn of 2009. They will work along with U.S. and NATO troops in curbing the drug trade.

At the same time, Obama, who has been quite critical of President Karzai's turning a blind eye to corruption and the illegal opium trade, is expected to exert more pressure on him to deliver and clamp in on the opium trade as well as those members of his administration (and his brother Ahmed Wali Karzai) who are allegedly involved in the illegal trade. Speaking to reporters in March 2009, Obama said that his administration "could not turn a blind eye to the corruption

that causes Afghans to lose faith in their own leaders,” an apparent reference to Karzai and his inability to curb corruption.

In calling for a regional approach to stabilizing Afghanistan, the U.S. seems to have indicated possible cooperation with Iran on a common agenda of curbing the drug trade. Iran, which shares a 900-km (560-mile) border with Afghanistan, is used as a major route for smuggling drugs to the West. Up to two million people, out of the 70 million population in Iran, are estimated to use narcotics. Speaking to reporters after the international conference on Afghanistan held in the Netherlands, Iran’s Deputy Foreign Minister, Mehdi Akhondzadeh, said that Iran was willing to take part in international efforts to help fight the drug trade in Afghanistan.

The U.S. must bring stability to the Afghan economy by finding a suitable substitute for its opium crop. One tactic would be to legalize production of opium and for the United States and its allies to purchase all that is produced, while facilitating transition to comparable revenue sources.

Regional approach

The new administration has expressed its intention to pursue a regional strategy in stabilising Afghanistan by engaging Afghanistan’s neighbouring countries with “legitimate national interests” in Afghanistan such as Pakistan, Iran, China, Russia, India, and the Central Asian States. In engaging the regional States, there seems to be a realisation in the new U.S. administration that no attempt at peace or stability can succeed in Afghanistan without cooperation from Afghanistan’s neighbours, as they all stand to gain from a peaceful and stable Afghanistan, as does Afghanistan itself. In March 2009, Obama announced the setting up of a new Contact Group for Afghanistan and Pakistan, bringing together countries with a stake in the region’s security.

Hence, Obama’s new approach is more open and clearly revolves around multilateralism, unlike the Bush administration’s approach which was rigid and based on unilateralism. In seeking cooperation from Afghanistan’s neighbours, it seems the U.S. policy is also based on defusing the impact of regional power rivalries and tensions on Afghanistan. The new regional approach, if implemented sincerely, could thus play an important role in defusing tensions among its neighbours, India-Pakistan relations on the one hand and between Afghanistan and Pakistan on the other.

Iran

President Obama’s comments regarding Iran’s involvement in Afghanistan have clearly shown a shift away from the previous Bush administration’s policy of avoiding direct contact with Iran. During an interview, the U.S. envoy to Pakistan and Afghanistan, Richard Holbrooke, has said that the presence of Iran

was obvious, as one could not talk about Afghanistan and exclude Iran. He further stated that the involvement of Iran, an important player in the region, could play a vital role in bringing stability to the war-torn country.

In Afghanistan, Iran has some major concerns. The Iranians have never been keen on the prospects of holding talks with the Taliban and have been trying to contain the narcotics trade which flows from Afghanistan and Pakistan. Another worry for Iran is that if stability is not brought to Afghanistan, the Taliban insurgency and violence would force millions of refugees to flee into Iran. Iran's and American interests converge in curbing the Taliban insurgency as well as clamping down on the flourishing drug trade. Referring to Iran, Holbrooke has said that the country had almost fought a war against the Taliban a little more than a decade ago and therefore had no interest in seeing their resurgence. However, although Iran's involvement will be much welcomed by the Shiite Hazara minority and the Northern Alliance, the Pashtun majority will be less enthusiastic about it. Hence, keeping in mind the centuries-old ethnic rivalries, the U.S. will have to be extremely cautious regarding the extent of the role of Iran in Afghanistan.

Pakistan-India

If the U.S. is sincere in involving all of Afghanistan's neighbours, it must not forget Indian and Pakistani competing interests in Afghanistan. Since the ouster of the Taliban regime in 2001, India's relations with Afghanistan have grown. A close ally of the Northern Alliance, India has been wary of any political accommodation with the Taliban. In order to achieve or create a regional environment that is conducive for State- and nation-building in Afghanistan, the U.S. should, in particular, encourage the resolution of contentious issues between India and Pakistan like the longstanding dispute over Kashmir and Pakistan's apprehensions (which Pakistan has repeatedly raised with the U.S. and Afghan authorities) regarding Indian meddling in Pakistan from Afghanistan. As Obama's policy outlines, Pakistan is pivotal for the new strategy to work. The U.S. must acknowledge and address Pakistan's legitimate concerns regarding India's formidable role in creating unrest in Pakistan's tribal areas and Balochistan through its presence in Afghanistan.

Although there was hope that the U.S. would include the issue of Kashmir in the new regional approach, it has failed to do so fearing that it would be unacceptable to India. The international community cannot continue to ignore the issue of Kashmir as an unresolved matter. In this regard, the U.S. has a major responsibility to use its diplomatic influence in UN and the world to convince India to resolve the dispute. The resolution of this contentious issue acceptable to both India and Pakistan as also the people of Jammu and Kashmir will create a regional environment highly conducive for State- and nation-building in Afghanistan.

Pakistan

President Obama has acknowledged that Afghanistan's and Pakistan's future is inextricably linked. Therefore, the solution to the Afghanistan situation lies in a regional approach that incorporates Pakistan's strategic interests. President Obama has said that a strong, united and stable Pakistan is what he wants. In appointing Richard Holbrooke as his special envoy to Pakistan and Afghanistan, the President has acknowledged that Pakistan is as much a part of the problem as of the solution to establishing stability in the region. Richard Holbrooke too has said that Afghanistan's future cannot be secured by counterinsurgency efforts alone; that will also require regional agreements that give Afghanistan's neighbours, most importantly Pakistan, a stake in the settlement.

Speaking to reporters in Washington in March 2009, President Obama said that Al Qaeda and affiliated militants pose a threat to Pakistan as much as they do to the U.S. Although Obama has acknowledged that Pakistan has been and continues to be a victim of terrorism, he has stated that Pakistan's government needs to become a stronger partner of the U.S. in destroying Al Qaeda safe havens in its tribal areas, and isolating Al Qaeda from the Pakistani people.

Even though Pakistan has rendered enormous sacrifices and suffered extensive collateral damage as an ally of the U.S. in its "war on terror", its role and efforts have not been fully appreciated. The perception that Pakistan is not completely committed to fighting Al Qaeda, as many in Pakistan's Intelligence and military circles allegedly continue to harbour such elements by giving them safe havens in the tribal areas, still exists among some in the international community, the U.S. and Afghanistan. The U.S. is convinced that the Al Qaeda threat mainly emanates from Pakistan, and it continues to pose a danger to Afghanistan as well as the U.S./NATO forces inside Afghanistan. President Obama has been of the view that Al Qaeda actively plans attacks on the U.S./NATO and Afghan forces from its safe havens in Pakistan, and the only way to eliminate the threat is to disrupt, dismantle and defeat Al Qaeda in Pakistan's tribal area.

Since 2001, Pakistan has been facing repercussions emanating from the trouble and upheaval in Afghanistan. The insurgency in Afghanistan has not only made the entire region extremely volatile and insecure, it has had a particularly negative impact on Pakistan's tribal belt. Initially, violence was restricted to the Tribal Agencies of North and South Waziristan. However, growing instability in Afghanistan, particularly in 2007, has spread to the relatively stable and peaceful Tribal Agencies of Mohmand, Khyber, Orakzai, Khurram, and has further reached the settled parts of Pakistan and its major cities. Since 2005, terrorist attacks in Pakistan have increased by an astronomical 746 per cent. In 2008 alone, 2,577 attacks and clashes took place, leaving 7,997 people killed and 9,670 injured; compared to 1,503 attacks and clashes in 2007, leaving 3,448 people dead and 5,353 injured.

During 2007-2009, under pressure from the U.S., Pakistan undertook military operations against militants in the tribal areas. As a result, there were huge civilian, military and militant losses numbering in thousands, not to forget the tens of thousands of residents that have been displaced as a result of the ongoing violence in FATA. According to the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), the situation in tribal and northwestern areas of Pakistan in particular had worsened in recent months, including the number fleeing their homes and the "weapon wounded" in a conflict involving a "complex constellation" of political and military movements. Head of operations for South Asia, Jacques de Maio, has said that the ICRC had taken care of an estimated 40,000 displaced people in 2008, compared with none in 2007, and was gearing up to deal with 140,000 displaced in 2009.

The U.S. must understand that Afghanistan and Pakistan cannot be considered as one theatre of the same conflict. The international community must realize that the problems of Afghanistan lie inside Afghanistan and the answers also lie in Afghanistan alone. In fact, the current unrest and instability in Pakistan's FATA is not the cause but rather the effect of the prolonged state of affairs in Afghanistan. Announcing his national security team in Chicago on December 1, 2008, President Obama said that Afghanistan is where the War on Terror began, and it is where it must end.⁶²

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