

Afghanistan and its geopolitical environment: opportunities and challenges *

*Simbal Khan ***

All through its long and varied history, Afghanistan, due to its unique geo political attributes, has had a profound impact on developments within the countries of the South and Central Asian regions. In the last quarter of the twentieth century, the 1979 Soviet military intervention in Afghanistan set into motion a cycle of war and chaos, which in turn has wrought critical changes within the geo-political environment of Afghanistan. The Soviet intervention was challenged by a number of interlinked forces - local Afghan, regional and international. The activation of these new forces and the trans-national functional linkages that enabled them to operate were to have a transformative impact on the whole region.

The U.S. military intervention in Afghanistan in 2001 has again set in motion a new cycle of war and instability. This ongoing phase of war is consequently impacting the geopolitical environment and the security of bordering states in complex ways.

This presentation attempts to sketch out the current state of the security situation in Afghanistan. After briefly examining the state of the 10-year old U.S.-led war, it flags some of the critical challenges faced by regional countries. The last section also briefly focuses on the broad opportunities that can realistically be exploited in a peaceful and stable Afghanistan.

War in Afghanistan: the current situation

As the year 2010 closed in, there was a growing realization among all stakeholders that President Obama's strategy for the war in Afghanistan was failing to stabilize the region and provide security in any meaningful way. The strategy was structured around five salient elements, namely:

1) Troop surge

The deployment of an additional 30,000 troops, mainly in the southern provinces of Helmand and Kandahar, and the eastern P2k region, has failed to achieve irreversible military success against the Taliban. While it was supposed to create "inkblots of security", deploying 42 out of a total of 46 combat battalions available to US/NATO to the troubled southern and eastern

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** *The writer is Director (Afghanistan and Central Asia), the Institute of Strategic Studies, Islamabad*

Afghanistan regions has only produced mixed results for the coalition. The concentration of the fighting forces in the south and east has made vulnerable northern and central Afghanistan, which so far had been peaceful. There has been a sharp deterioration of security in the northern Kunduz, Baglan and Badgis provinces in the year 2010. The central provinces of Wardak and Kapisa have also seen security deteriorate as the pressure on the Taliban in the south has pushed them into less defended areas. The much publicised clearing of Taliban-held areas such as Zahri, Arghandab and Panjwai districts around Kandahar, and districts in central Helmand such as Nawa, Garmsir and to an extent Marja, have brought only limited reduction in insurgent attacks and only a tactical retreat of the Taliban. There are fears that the Taliban are likely to return in spring and summer to re-launch attacks.

2) Protecting the population

The much trumpeted COIN (counterinsurgency) mantra of protecting the population is now being replaced by tougher counterterrorism goals of killing, capturing and eliminating Taliban fighters and commanders. The military offensive in Kandahar, which was strongly opposed by the local leadership in the province, was accompanied by an array of tactics marked by increased brutality. The most prominent of these tactics has been the large-scale demolition of homes that has created widespread bitterness among the civilians who remained in their villages when the U.S.-NATO offensive was launched, as well as among those who had fled before the offensive.

Moreover, according to reports, the U.S. troops in Arghandab, Zhari and Panjwai districts have used armoured bulldozers, high explosives, missiles and airstrikes in "routinely destroying almost every unoccupied home or unused farm building in areas where they are operating". Unsurprisingly then, according to OXFAM, the number of internally displaced people (IDPs) has also gone up 50% since last year.

3) Build national security forces and government civilian capacity

Although there has been significant increase in numbers of personnel in the Afghan National Army and Afghan National Police, which have risen to 170,000 and 134,000 respectively, the institutions remains poor qualitatively. Ethnically imbalanced, represented by low literacy rates, with a high rate of attrition and lack of discipline, the military has been plagued due to a number of factors. The disproportionate ethnic mix remains a primary concern. As far as building government capacity is concerned, the fiasco of the recently concluded parliamentary elections and failure of the Karzai government to improve governance has meant an actual shrinkage of government presence at the district level. The government is only able to maintain a presence in districts where the coalition troops are deployed and the Afghan security forces are as yet, not capable of leading operations independently in areas facing insurgencies.

4) *Degrade Taliban strength, reverse momentum and bring to the negotiating table*

As stated above, this does not seem likely. According to the December review carried out by the U.S., progress against the Taliban is still reversible. However, the logic of the current military strategy still seeks to “degrade” and arrest the momentum of the Taliban before they are brought to the negotiating table. According to ISAF sources, approximately 7,100 special operations counterterrorism missions have been conducted between May 30 and December 2, 2010, in which more than 600 insurgent leaders were killed or captured. In addition, over 2,000 enemy fighters have been killed, and over 4,100 fighters captured. However, the same sources maintain that the Taliban retain the ability to regenerate and a military victory against them is even possible.

5) *July 2011 drawdown of combat troops*

The NATO countries at the NATO summit in Lisbon in November 2010, announced 2014 as the date when most NATO states will withdraw their combat troops from Afghanistan. In one stroke, this announcement made irrelevant the other important date of July 2011, which had preoccupied all stakeholders for the past one year. By coming out with the new date the NATO summit achieved two things simultaneously-On the one hand, the new date indicated that whatever the situation on the ground, European NATO states will be out of Afghanistan in four years or earlier. The other indication is that the U.S. commitment is now open-ended as its combat forces will likely remain in Afghanistan beyond the nominal 2014 deadline.

Impact on the region

The important question is how the current state of war in Afghanistan impacts the regional security environment. In this regards, there are a number of challenges arising out of the ongoing war:

1) *Vulnerability of regional states*

Regional states’ vulnerability is varied. This variability is dependent on a number of factors. The states with contiguous borders with Afghanistan are understandably more vulnerable than regional states that have geopolitical interests in Afghanistan but do not share its borders. The most notable among this group are Russia, Turkey and India. Among the states that do share a border, the vast deserts that straddle Iran’s and Turkmenistan’s long and sparsely populated border with Afghanistan, insulates them to a certain extent from the direct fallout of the war. On the other hand, Pakistan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan remain more vulnerable to the spill-over effect of the war due to certain specific geopolitical

features such as the presence of trans-border co-ethnic communities, difficult terrains, historical/structural developments and politics of border zones etc.

This variability in geopolitical risks and challenges for regional states also explains the vast differences in their approaches to the war. For example, U.S. military intervention in Afghanistan also created the space for extending and expanding India's influence inside the country without suffering any of direct affects of the war in its own national space. Joining the coalition of countries to support the U.S. effort in the "war on terror" allowed India to bypass the geopolitical limitations placed upon its ability to extend political and economic ties with Afghanistan during the Taliban rule.

Similarly Russia, by cooperating with NATO over the Northern distribution network and the broader reset in its relations with the U.S., has tacitly supported the continuation of the coalition's military-led securitized approaches. As Tajikistan, which borders Afghanistan, also remains dependent on Russia's economic and military support, Russia indirectly manages to play a very important and complex role in Afghanistan. Both India and Russia favour a status quo and there is less urgency in their official policies for seeking an end to war. These divergent geopolitical interests have in turn, stalled the process of developing a viable regional consensus over Afghanistan.

2) Spill-over effect

The trans-border nature of communities which straddle most of the borders in the region, poses some of the most complex challenges for Pakistan. The last ten years have seen an incremental expansion of the war into the country's border zones. Pakistan has lost more than 35,000 civilians and more than 2,800 armed forces personnel fighting against terrorists and insurgent groups that oppose the government's support to the coalition's war effort in Afghanistan.

Pakistan currently has 140,000 troops deployed along its 2500 km long border with Afghanistan. The last two years have seen the Pakistan army undertake three large scale military operations (in Bajour, Swat and South Waziristan) and a number of limited tactical operations (some of them ongoing) in various parts of the border region. Although the human and material costs of these operations have been staggering for Pakistan, they have had a minimal or no impact on the momentum of the Taliban campaign in Afghanistan.

In 2010, the focus of the US/NATO strategy on showing tangible military success against the Taliban led to increased kinetic operations within the southern and eastern parts of Afghanistan. The trans-border nature of the insurgency has meant that there was a direct spill-over affect of instability and insecurity in Pakistan's north-western borders. Pakistan responded to this expansion of the war into its territory last year by temporarily closing the NATO transit route through Torkham.

The recent escalation of war in northern Afghanistan has also created security challenges for both Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. The Taliban have retaliated against pressure in the south and east by increasing their activities and attacks in the weakly defended northern Afghanistan. This has increased the vulnerability of the borders of these Central Asian states to incursions from trans-border militant organisations such as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), and both Uzbekistan and Tajikistan reported increased terrorist attacks in 2010. Although China also remains relatively insulated due to its high altitude, impassable border in the narrow Wakhan corridor, it remains concerned that instability in Afghanistan will provide space for militants to attempt infiltration through Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan.

3) Al Qaeda and counterterrorism strategies

As long as instability and conflict continues in Afghanistan, al Qaeda personnel will continue to find host environments that provide them sanctuaries as well as fresh recruits for their activities in the region. This will remain a major challenge for the regional states. There is a clear pattern emerging; long-running local political conflicts and weak states in Yemen, Somalia and Afghanistan are providing opportunities to international terrorist elements to thrive and expand activities. There are certain notable similarities in the broad dynamics of how trans-national terrorist organisations operate in these three very diverse arenas.

The year 2010 saw a clearer pattern of trans-national terrorist organisations embedding themselves and finding a role in conflicts, which are essentially local in nature. By aligning themselves with local political actors challenging weak states, they are able to find sanctuaries and space for radicalization of local actors and their placement into cells with trans-national ambitions and goals. Invariably, the weak states are also increasing their reliance on the West (US/NATO) to fulfil their security needs.

Crucially, Al Qaeda is finding space in these conflicts less as foot soldiers and more as tech savvy specialists bringing in specialized knowledge of new communications, explosives and weapon technologies. The growing reliance on counterterrorism strategies to respond to the alleged presence of Al Qaeda in Pakistan's tribal belt has seen a quantum jump in the use of drone strikes. There have been 124 drone strikes in 2010 alone, killing 1,184 people. These strikes have inflamed Pushtun resentment and have been successfully exploited by the anti-state militant groups such as the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and Al Qaeda to enhance recruitment.

4) Long-term US/NATO military footprint in Afghanistan and regional security

Any open ended long-term US/NATO residual presence in Afghanistan beyond 2014, as mentioned during the NATO summit, will likely lead to a

continuation of armed resistance by a growing number of insurgent groups. Some of these groups are likely to seek support from co-ethnic communities living in neighbouring states. This is likely to expand the arena of instability and have deleterious long-term impact on the security of bordering states.

As the other NATO states reduce their military footprint in Afghanistan, there is going to be an incremental “Americanization” of the war, both in sustaining the material as well as the human costs. This eventuality will also preclude a negotiated political settlement as no nationalist Afghan political actor or organisation is likely to accept the long term presence of foreign troops. In the absence of a broad political solution, this increased Americanization of the war is likely to be challenged by an increasingly nationalist Taliban/ Pushtun insurgency. Bordering states such as Pakistan and Uzbekistan remain far more vulnerable to such an eventuality than other regional states such as India.

5) *Political economy of war: north and south transit corridors*

The growing U.S. military footprint in Afghanistan has seen an incremental increase in volume of goods transported through the southern transport corridor that goes thorough the length of Pakistan. This route connects the Karachi port to the borders of Afghanistan at two main border crossings at Torkham and Spin Boldak. As the U.S. presence in Afghanistan increased and consequently the Taliban increased attacks on NATO trucks traveling through Pakistan, U.S. planners in 2008 opened the Northern Distribution Network (NDN), a commercially based logistical corridor connecting Baltic and Black Sea ports with Afghanistan via Russia, Central Asia, and the Caucasus.

Touted by the U.S. as the ‘new Silk route’, this North and South transport corridor has caused huge distortions in local economies of the vast areas that it travels through. In Pakistan, they have been a source of vast corruption and smuggling scandals, and have empowered and enriched private trucking companies, armed non-state actors, security companies as well as boosting the Taliban indirectly. This has further eroded the power of the State along the routes that these convoys take. The fuel supplies to Bagram through Kyrgyzstan last year proved a catalyst for the violence in the country. There are similar reports of corruption and distortions coming out of Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. In any case, the vast profits involved create vested interests in the status quo and the continuation of the business of war. This makes change more difficult.

6) *Drugs and Narcotics*

According to a recent United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) report, the net opium cultivation in Afghanistan in agricultural land is on 123,000 ha in the year 2010. There is a zero percent change from the year 2009 and the report estimates the farm gate value of opium production to roughly about 5% of Afghanistan’s annual GDP of around 12 billion dollars. The U.S. military

strategy in the south and east Afghanistan relies on the support of local warlords implicated in drug trade, to raise militias in order to fight the Taliban and this has negatively impacted the coalition's policies towards drug production. This situation poses serious consequences for regional countries, which remain the main transit points and in case of Russia, an important market as well.

Opportunities

Clearly, Afghanistan remains the missing link that is thwarting the realization of the region's full potential even as prospects of a peaceful Afghanistan offer huge opportunities for regional cooperation.

In this context, China and Pakistan appear to be natural partners. China has the economic and technical expertise and resources to undertake large infrastructural projects, and energy and transport corridors traversing Afghanistan. Pakistan in turn is geopolitically the most feasible route - both on land and sea - for transporting Afghan and Central Asian energy and natural resources to Chinese mainland, avoiding the congested sea lanes in the Strait of Malacca.

Chinese investment in Afghanistan merits some attention and specially the \$3.5 billion investment in the Aynak copper field in the Logar province can serve as a model for future investments. The plan for the copper field includes the construction of planned freight train network linking to Pakistan's and Tajikistan's railway systems and also provides for the setting up of a power generation plant. This model demonstrates how the development of natural resources can be simultaneously linked to enhancing regional transport and trade networks.

In the end, it is vital to remember that Pakistan-China partnership in the region can serve as a pivot around which a framework for peace and stability in Afghanistan can be structured.