

# End Game In Afghanistan

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Recently concluded strategic dialogue between US and Pakistan in Washington has clearly brought out the urgency to forge a road map for post US withdrawal from Afghanistan. It is imperative that the cartographers in the US as well as the regional players should understand the ground reality in its correct perspective. Europeans too have to design an independent course for themselves lest the Americans propensities and limitations weigh down their options and damage their interest in the region in the long run.

### **Pakistan's Army Firm Stand**

Whatever has filtered out from Washington and Islamabad about the dialogue reflects the state of confusion in which Pakistan seems to have firmly held its position in the light of its own long term interests. Much of the credit of this is being attributed to the military establishment, in particular to General Ashfaq Parvez Kayani, the chief of the army staff. It is reported that he declared his bottomline position that Pakistan Army will not launch an operation in North Waziristan to satisfy the American demand rather, it would choose its own timings and methodology and refused to be dissuaded from his point of view. Earlier, the American overlordship on matters relating to the so called war against terrorism in Afghanistan had been effectively challenged by Pakistan's military hierarchy following the NATO helicopter attack on a Pakistan military outpost in the KURRAM valley in which three Pakistani soldiers were killed and several others injured. This was an unprovoked and unwarranted assault on Pakistan's already frayed and injured sovereignty.

The military high command in the wake of this attack for the first time after its blindfolded plunge into partnership in the war against terrorism promptly proceeded to slap a ban on one of the two NATO supply route from Pakistan to Afghanistan. It was an astute move to deliver the message home to the American and NATO forces that Pakistan holds the whiphand on the Afghan battlefield. Yet, on the other hand, the CHAMMAN supply route was allowed to remain operative. This turned out to be a very profitable tactical game play. As a consequence, the American's were obliged to apologize. In recent history there seems to be no parallel to this except the US apology rendered to China over the Hainan Spy Plane incident on 1st April 2001 in which US Navy EP-3E spy plane collided with PRC interceptor fighter jet J-8 killing one PRCN pilot. The EP-3 was forced to make an emergency landing on Hainan. The 24 crew members were detained and interrogated by the Chinese authorities until an apology was delivered by United States government regarding the incident.

Putting the US on the back foot really set the stage for Pakistan's intransigent mood in the dialogue.

The evolving picture after the strategic dialogue clearly indicates;

- a) that the Obama Administration is desperate to frame an exit strategy for withdrawal from Afghanistan but is trapped in the rift between Pentagon's traditional obduracy to accept failure and the civil administration to cut losses and focus on domestic issues.
- b) in spite of American and Europeans overriding interest to carve out a substantial role for India in the post withdrawal Afghanistan, it is extremely hard to convince Pakistan on allowing any major concession to India without resolution of the Kashmir problem. Pakistan military is displaying a rather stern mood for the first time after 9/11 as reflected by effect that the Pakistan military delegation to the US were comprised only 4 members while that of the United States consisted of 34 representatives.

## Obama & Kashmir

Obama's promise of change seems to have fizzled out. He is still entrapped in fighting domestic battles against the Neocons and the Indo-Israeli lobbies who have taken a strong position on United States gradual retreat from Afghanistan and the Middle East. Obama's prospective visit to India in November this year would shed a great deal of light on how he intends to proceed on major foreign policy issues like Kashmir and Palestine. He had boldly talked about settling the Kashmir dispute during his election campaign but he is now afraid even to mention the 'K' (Kashmir) word.

Will he pick up the courage during his Indian visit to talk about Kashmir where a raging freedom movement is going apace? It will be a defining test for the future of South Asia and the outcome of the conflict in Afghanistan.

## Peace Initiative

While the Americans are eager to quickly settle the Afghan imbroglio there seems to be a very obvious disconnect between perceptions and the realities of the Afghan situation. Gen David Petraeus the commander of the Af-Pak war theatre is still determined to reverse "The Taliban Momentum". His forces in Afghanistan appear to lack both the ability and the will to forge out in the countryside which is almost entirely controlled by the freedom fighters (Mujahideen).

The recent evidence shows that whenever the NATO and American forces have dared to move out of the sanctuaries of garrison strong holds they have consistently been given a bloody nose by the resistance fighters.

This year the casualty figures have already topped 600 dead and twice as many wounded. This is the highest casualty figure of the 9 year war. Clearly, Gen. David Petraeus's mission is not making any headway. No doubt the much trumpeted KANDHAR offensive is nowhere to be seen. There is not even a chance of this operation materializing due to the onset of the winter season. Afghan winters are very harsh by any standard.

The other element of Gen. Petraeus's strategy is aimed at dividing the resistance by lucrative offers of money and a place in the government. This too is making slow progress as Karzai's peace JIRGAH headed by Prof Burhanuddin Rabbani is still mired in problems of cobbling together a 70 member body represented by at least some people of national repute. Such a large body obviously is difficult to form. There seems to be no clear methodology how to proceed about their business of peace making. Already Syed Rehmani a senior spokesman of the Taliban has cut Prof. Rabbani to size by saying "Rabbani is a traitor like Najeebullah and would meet the same fate". Beside, the latest news is that Prof. Rabbani is admitted in a Dubai hospital for a possible cardiac treatment.

Karzai's peace mission therefore has run aground even before it could take off. If the American's are putting any premium on this mission then they might well be advised to start looking for alternatives. Karzai, on the other hand, is feverishly involved in a propaganda campaign to project himself as a man who could deliver on dividing the Pushtoon Mujahideen. But in reality he is squandering the American dollars on a futile exercise. Let it be once again reiterated that 'Afghans can be hired but not purchased'.

What really needs to be done for resolution of the thorny Afghan issue to have a change of heart and a radical slashing down of the objectives? The American demand that the Mujahideen put down their weapons and come down to the table for talks and that too

with Karzai. It is asking for the moon. The only constructive dialogue can be held between the American's and Mullah Omar. These are the only two parties to the conflict. All others are irrelevant. Much disinformation has been spread about Haqqani's Network which is nothing more than a subsidiary of the Taliban Movement and would abide by any decision taken by Mullah Mohammad Omar.

As for the American demand for perpetuating the present constitution of Afghanistan the sooner this demand is dropped is better. Future of Afghanistan cannot be visualized without the SHARIAH rule. What however will be the form and shape of the SHARIAH rule can be discussed as its previous application by the Taliban was harsh and inflexible. This is a subject for the Islamic scholars to debate and pass judgment on. Discussion should begin in parallel now rather than being relegated to a later time when Taliban are already in control of Afghanistan.

Any ambition of maintaining US garrisons in Afghanistan a la Iraq must be abandoned. In Afghanistan it will not work and will only result in prolongation of the conflict. Afghanistan is not Iraq, the conflict here has very distinct ideological moorings.

### **Saudi Arabia's Interest**

Saudi Arabia has of late have been showing interest in their own role in the resolution of the Afghan problem. Reportedly, some very important personalities including Prince Turki Al Faisal, the former head of the Saudi intelligence were present on the fringes of the Pak-US dialogue recently concluded in Washington.

Saudi Arabia's role would become relevant only if they were to move independently of the American road map for the future Afghanistan. They do have a significant influence both in Afghanistan and Pakistan but their subservient image to American policy stands in the way of exercising a significant and positive role.

### **Conclusion**

In the end it appears that US is still confused about how to disengage from Afghanistan. Lately, they seem to have tilted a little more towards Pakistan's perception but are still not prepared to disregard the India's larger than life ambitions in the region. Whereas it would be natural for India has to recede in case of the US withdrawal. Thereby automatically limiting India's capacity to serve as a bulwark for the western interest against the growing influence of China in the region.

This is a bitter pill that the American policy makers have to swallow.

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